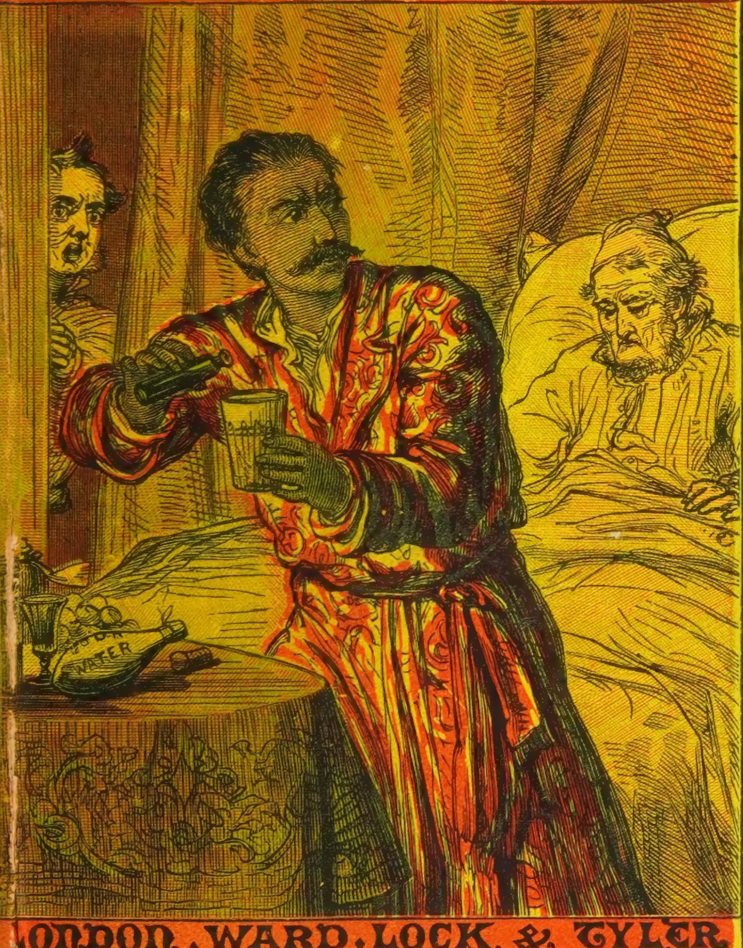
Y THE AUTHOR OF 'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.'

DEAD MEN'S SHOES



LONDON, WARD, LOCK & TYLER

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DEAD MEN'S SHOES

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

LONDON
WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER
WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW
1876

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HENRY BLACKLOCK AND CO.,
ALLEN STREET,
LONDON, E.C.

To Sir J. CORDY BURROWS, J.P.,
BRIGHTON.

Dear Sir Cordy Burrows,

If anything can justify the dedication of a book to any one, it surely must be a friendship that has lasted nearly twenty years; marked on your side by many acts of care and kindness, and on mine by a most sincere appreciation of your genial and generous nature. I have therefore great pleasure in recording this fact, and I have still greater pleasure in dedicating this story to you.

Believe me,

Dear Sir Cordy Burrows,

Very sincerely yours,

THE AUTHOR.

Richmond,
February, 1876.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER PAGE
I. "Plunged in the Depth of Helpless Poverty" 5
II. "O World, thy Slippery Turns!" 14
III. The True Metal 20
IV. "Had the Chance been with us that has not been" . . 23
V. Sibyl Faunthorpe's Diary 28
VI. The Elite of Redcastle 41
VII. Drifting into Haven 45
VIII. The Return of the Prodigal. 50
IX. Uncle Trenchard 56
X. Sibyl takes the Lead 59
XI. How Stephen Trenchard Forgives 64
XII. Love, then, had Hope of Richer Store 71
XIII. The Sweets of Life 80
XIV. Making Ready for Victory 85
XV. Town and County 90
XVI. A Mysterious Visitor 100
XVII. The Wanderer's Return 111
XVIII. At Arm's Length. 116
XIX. A Dangerous Triumph. 123
XX. Half Confidence 134
XXI. Received by the County 139
XXII. Jenny's Visitor 143
XXIII. "Will Fortune never come with both hands full?" . . 149
XXIV. Startling Information 160
XXV. Town Talk 168
XXVI. Between Love and Gold 172
XXVII. Sir Wilford has his own Way 178
XXVIII. Marion is raised to Distinction 185
XXIX. At the How 192
XXX. Tilberry Steeplechase 197
XXXI. Joel Pilgrim 212
XXXII. Alexis Comes to Grief 219
XXXIII. Fallen by the Wayside 227
XXXIV. Good Samaritans 231
XXXV. Bitter Almonds 239
XXXVI. Village Slander 246
XXXVII. Trot's History 251
XXXVIII. Gaining Time 256
XXXIX. At Bay 263
XL. On the Threshold of a Discovery 267
XLI. A Father's Claim 275
XLII. A Wedding Eve 281
XLIII. The Passing-Bell 289
XLIV. Dark Surmises 295
XLV. In the Surgery 302
XLVI. Stephen Trenchard surprises his Friends 307
XLVII. "It is not now as it has been of yore" 315
XLVIII. "'Tis held that sorrow makes us wise" 331
XLIX. "But here is one who loves you as of old" 336
L. Alexis Investigates 342
LI. Mr. Levison Cross-examines 353
LII. The Podmores think of Emigration 361
LIII. Committed for Trial 367
LIV. "A Dark Tale Darkly Finished" 377
Epilogue 382

DEAD MEN'S SHOES.

CHAPTER I.

"PLUNGED IN THE DEPTH OF HELPLESS POVERTY."

A GIRL-WOMAN alone on Battersea Bridge, reading a letter in the December sunset—one of those mild autumnal afternoons which hang upon the skirts of winter. A girl in years—a woman in cares. Dark brown eyes set in a pale, sharply set face; mouth rosy and beautiful in form, but too firm in its lines to be altogether lovely in a woman. A girl whom the passers by look at interrogatively, wondering that so much beauty should go alone, and so poorly clad. Her clothes are not common, but shabby—a black silk dress that has once been handsome and fashionable; a black felt hat trimmed with threadbare velvet; a sealskin jacket worn bald at the edges, and dull with exposure to hard weather; gloves which indicate that to be gloved at all has cost the wearer a struggle; boots whose decay is no less evident than the symmetry of the slender feet they cover. She walks listlessly up and down the pavement of the bridge—just the one quiet promenade to be found in this neighbourhood—reading a letter from home, or the place which was her home two years ago. She has seen much of the world during these two years—in her own opinion too much, for she has seen not the fair and shining fabric in life's loom, but the ragged sleave thereof.

This is the letter which she reads, not once, but three times over, with deepest attention, as she paces up and down the quiet old bridge, while the sunset fades from the cold gray river, and from that Dutch picture of old red roofs and water-side shanties on the Middlesex shore, which painters have loved, and which the Thames Embankment may perchance have blotted out by this time:—

"*Redcastle, December* 11*th*, 186—.

"MY DEAR SIBYL,

"An event has happened which I think likely to exercise a wonderful influence for good upon all our lives. Stephen Trenchard, your mother's brother, the uncle Stephen you have all talked about as children, and whose wealth was your poor mother's boast, has returned to England, after nearly thirty years' absence, yellow, wrinkled, and withered, and eccentric in manners and habits, but I think not unkindly disposed to any of us. He has taken a house at Redcastle, and is anxious to have his nieces about him, as he calls it. Marion has already exchanged the discomforts and deprivations of a parish doctor's household for the Oriental luxuries of Lancaster Lodge. I daresay you remember the house, a square stone building with two tall iron gates, and two lodges within thirty yards of the hall door. Some people will have grandeur at the sacrifice of consistency. He seems—I mean your uncle Stephen—to have taken a great fancy to Marion. I meet her lolling in his barouche, trying to look as if she had been accustomed to ride in a three hundred guinea carriage all her life, and really doing it very well. Jenny has also been to see her uncle, but he thought her rough and uncultivated, and I fear that, with her present deficiency of manners, she has little chance of pleasing him. I have sent her to Miss Mercer's as a day scholar, since Michaelmas, but as she *will* talk to the boys going and returning, I really think the change is doing her more harm than good. I have dined with Mr. Trenchard, and can assure you that the splendour of his table is something to remember. I don't pretend to be a judge of wines, though I could give you a lecture upon tannic acid, alcohol, and so on—experience, to my mind, being better than theory, and my opportunities of the rarest—but I know that after dining with Stephen Trenchard I felt as if my veins ran quicksilver. Well, my dear, I want you to have your chance as well as Marion, and I think the best and wisest course for you will be to beg a month's holiday from your employer, Mrs. Hazleton, and come to spend Christmas with your poor old uncle Robert. No doubt if you do, your rich old uncle Stephen will ask you to transfer your society to Lancaster Lodge, and then you and Marion will have equal chances. I dare say it will end by his asking one or both of you to live with him and keep his house. He has, I believe, something like a million to leave behind him, and you three girls are his nearest relations, and his natural heirs. He has spoken very kindly of your mother.

"Let me know what Mrs. Hazleton says about a holiday. If a month is too much you might ask for a fortnight. I should think it most unlikely that you need ever return to her. With such a man as old Trenchard for your uncle, and well disposed towards you, your teaching days ought to be over.

"Your affectionate Uncle,
"ROBERT FAUNTHORPE."

"My teaching days," repeats the young woman, bitterly. "He little knows that they were the height of luxury compared to what has come after them."

The letter is addressed to—

MISS FAUNTHORPE,
AT MRS. HAZLETON'S, 19, LOWTHER STREET,
ECCLESTON SQUARE.

It has been re-addressed by an humble friend of Miss Faunthorpe's, in the person of Mrs. Hazleton's housemaid, who has enclosed the letter in an envelope directed to—

MRS. STANMORE,
AT MRS. BONNY'S, 11, DIXON STREET,
CHELSEA.

An address which indicates a descent in the social scale from the semi-Belgravian gentility of Lowther Street, Eccleston Square. And how comes Miss Faunthorpe to be Mrs. Stanmore, while her affectionate uncle, Robert Faunthorpe, remains unaware of a transmutation which must needs have some influence for good or evil on his niece's future career? Marriage is one of those inadvertences which can hardly go for nothing even in the easiest life.

"So Marion is exhibiting herself about Redcastle in a three hundred guinea barouche," says Mrs. Stanmore, putting the letter in her pocket, "while I have hardly shoes to my feet. I—who was supposed to be the handsome sister, and the clever sister, and the lucky sister! And I dare not show my face in Redcastle, not even if half a million of money is to be lost by my absence. To think that uncle Stephen should choose just this particular time for his return; to think that he should return at all, when Marion and I made up our minds ever so long ago that he was little better than a myth, and was sure to have married a begum without telling anybody, and to die in India, leaving all his money to horrid copper-coloured children. Lucky for Marion!"

Then, after a pause, leaving the bridge and entering the shabby street leading to Cheyne Walk, she continues her self-communing thus:—

"What shall I say to uncle Robert? Suppose he were to come to town and call at Mrs. Hazleton's. He may have money now to pay for the journey. It was safe enough before. Poor uncle Robert never had a spare pound, or ever wasted a shilling, except the shillings he had to pay for summonses because of being behindhand with the taxes. If he should come up to London? Or if uncle Stephen should be in town and call in Lowther Street? More likely that. Anglo-Indians are such active creatures. What am I to do?"

Thus disjointedly run her thoughts, as she walks—very quickly now—along the narrow, shabby street, past the fried-fish shop, and the pork-butcher's, and the emporium for second-hand goods—from a picture of the Holy Family, after Raffaelle, very much framed, to a flat iron, or a pair of bluchers—the greengrocer's, also coal merchant, the cook-shop, with its steam-tarnished windows and reeking odour of boiled beef and stick-jaw pudding.

"That reminds me," Mrs. Stanmore says to herself, as the reek of cooked provisions salutes her nostrils, "there's nothing for dinner."

She pauses and takes counsel with herself. Her eye wanders from the cook-shop to the fishmonger's, thence ranges to the pork butcher's. Her election lies among these. Cambridge sausages are savoury, but dear; and Mrs. Bonny, the landlady, has a trick of overdoing all things entrusted to her culinary art. A pound of Cambridge sausages, reduced to grounds and grease, are hardly worth the shilling they cost. Boiled beef is expensive and weighs heavy. For a cheap relish, a zest which shall make bread and butter supply the place of dinner, your fishmonger is your best friend. Mrs. Stanmore patronizes the finny tribe. She selects an eightpenny haddock, dried and salted, from the merchant's store, and carries it home with her, rolled up in brown paper. She stops at the cheap baker's for a half-quartern loaf, with which the bit over is not unacceptable. "I wonder what Marion would think if she could see me now?" she asks herself; "Marion who always complained of my pride, and called herself the Cinderella of the family. Her Cinderella-ship never brought her so low as this."

Home! bitter mockery of a sweet word. She turns out of the shabby street into a street still shabbier, narrow, dirty, and out at elbows. Yet at its worst not quite so bad as a modern street under the same conditions, for the red brick houses are substantial and roomy, and the worm-eaten oaken window-frames shut out the wind better than the speculative builder's warped and shrunken deal.

The house which Mrs. Stanmore enters is dark and gloomy. The wail of a fretful child sounds from the basement as she lets herself in at the street door with a convenient latch-key. A glimmer from the kitchen stairs is the only light visible, and to this glimmer Mrs. Stanmore seems to address herself.

"I've brought home a haddock, Mrs. Bonny. Will you be kind enough to broil it at six o'clock?"

"Oh, very well," answers a querulous voice from unseen depths below. "You can put the 'addock on the window-sill. I'll come and fetch it when I've got time; but I can't say nothink about it's being done by six, for my fire's got low after ironin'. The parlour has gone out to tea."

This last remark has a reproachful sound, as who should say, "You never spare me trouble by going out visiting."

Mrs. Stanmore deposits the dried fish, and ascends the dark, old-fashioned staircase, smelling of mice, whose hurried scamper is audible behind the mouldering wainscot. One room, the first floor front, comprises Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore's share of number eleven, Dixon Street. It is happily a rather large room, with three windows, provided with old-fashioned window-seats. The furniture is old like the house, worn and dingy, but solid furniture that has served several generations of housekeepers and a ragged regiment of lodgers. In the glow of a cheery little fire the dim old room has a homely, not unfriendly look. The old tent bedstead has been pushed into the most obscure corner. There are two arm-chairs, with faded chintz covers, a sofa, large and ponderous. There is a round table opposite the wide old fireplace, and another table against the wall, surmounted by a japanned iron tea-tray of a bright red ground with a landscape in the middle, a rosewood tea-caddy, a pair of blown glass decanters, empty, a family Bible—the landlady's—a ragged copy of Byron's "Don Juan," and two odd duodecimo volumes of "Tom Jones," in brown calf—the lodger's.

Mrs. Stanmore lights a small paraffine lamp, takes off jacket and hat, and proceeds to prepare the evening meal. She has tea-things and tea-kettle to her hand in the roomy and mousey old closet beside the fireplace—such a closet as is only to be found in old houses, large enough for half a dozen burglars to hide in, or a whole nursery of children to play in, and with all manner of odd corners and shelves, and perchance an inner cupboard lurking mysteriously in its panelled recesses.

Mrs. Stanmore fills the kettle, and sets out the tea-things on the red japanned tray, and cuts a plate of bread and butter, and makes a round of toast deftly enough, though a year ago she was about the least handy of her sex in such small domestic offices. That stern schoolmistress, necessity, has taught her many things. How young she looks in the ruddy light of the fire, as she kneels on the hearth-rug toasting that round of bread for the poor meal that is to be dinner, tea, and supper all in one, for Mrs. Bonny's first-floor lodgers!—how young and how pretty! every feature so daintily fashioned, eyes so darkly lustrous, colouring so delicate; young, and with much need of love and sympathy, of comfort and careful tendance.

"And so uncle Stephen has really come home—richer than we ever made him in our dreams when we were children—and Marion is tasting all the pleasures his wealth can buy for her, Marion whom I pitied so when I left her behind me at Redcastle. She might pity me now, from the depth of her heart, if she could see me. She might have written to tell me the change in her fortunes—selfish thing. I suppose it is on account of my not answering her last two letters—such stupid letters as they were too—full of 'I hope you are free from cold,' and 'I trust you are enjoying the nice autumn weather'—and uncle Robert's rheumatic gout."

She lapses into deeper meditation, looking into a red cavern in the heart of the fire, forgetful of the toast which hangs despondently upon the twopenny tin toasting-fork, shaped like Neptune's trident. Meditation full of rue, for she has done the most foolish thing a woman can do, except one, which is to repent too late of her folly; and she is fast coming to that ultimate stage of foolishness, vain regret for an irrevocable act.

She is still kneeling in front of the fire, absent-minded, absorbed, when the door opens, and a young man comes in, slowly, heavily, like one who brings no gladness with him, and has no hope of finding comfort at home. He comes quietly to the hearth, lays his hand upon Sibyl's shoulder, and addresses her not unkindly, but with little warmth in his tone.

"Well, little old woman, brooding over the fire as usual? What's the matter now?"

"Not much more than usual," his wife answers, without looking up. "You've had your customary luck, I suppose?" she inquires, after a pause, during which her husband has taken off his shabby overcoat, and flung himself into one of the armchairs.

"Yes, the wheel of fortune hasn't turned the other way yet. It revolves persistently, but always—like the planets—in the same direction. The immutable laws of bad luck are not to be abrogated in my favour. The fellows I wanted to see—butterfly friends of the past, who might lend me a fiver if I could catch them in the right humour—were all out. The situation I applied for has been given to somebody else. They had a hundred and thirty-nine applicants, the principal told me, and gave the berth to the applicant who dotted his i's with the nearest approach to mathematical precision. 'We take a man's handwriting as the physical expression of his mental bias,' said the principal, 'and what we want is precision.' Now you know I never dot my i's at all, or if I do the dot is so far from the letter as to make my meaning all the more unintelligible. So much for the clerkship. The commission agency we saw advertised turns out a 'do.' Agent required to put down fifty pounds as a guarantee of *bona fides.* I applied for an agency in the wine trade, offered to a young gentleman moving in good society and able to push a new brand of champagne; but when the wine merchant saw me, he asked, rather pertinently, if I moved in good society in this coat. I told him I was a gentleman by birth and education, and knew some of the best people in London. 'Very likely, my dear sir,' replies the grape-doctor, 'but you don't visit them.. We want young men who dress well, and look as if they could afford to drink the wine they recommend; men who have the appearance of wealth with the unscrupulousness of poverty.' Rather neatly put by our friend the gooseberry-fermenter, wasn't it?"

"And you have done nothing, earned nothing, are no nearer earning anything than you were yesterday?" asks Sibyl, without lifting her eyes to his face.

Yet the time was, not a year ago, when to gaze upon that countenance seemed to her like reading a poem, when every turn of the handsome head, every sparkle of the dark eyes—eyes ever of uncertain hue, but always dark—was a thing to remember and dream about;—when to watch him across a crowded room was quiet happiness, all-sufficing for an exacting love—when to hear his voice, gay or grave, was sweeter than music.

And now he sits a few paces from her, worn out, weary, dispirited, in sore need of comfort, and she cannot raise her eyes from moody contemplation of the fire. The difference is marked, the reason obvious. A year ago he was an undeclared lover—to-day he is an actual husband. Then there was not a many-petalled flower which did not suggest the question, "Loves me, loves me not?" Now he has loved her and won her, and they have essayed to sail along the river of life together, and found the navigation difficult—ay, hard and bitter as that weedy swamp through which Sir Samuel Baker's craft was toilfully dragged under Afric's torrid sky.

"You couldn't give a neater definition of my position," replies Alex Secretan, otherwise Stanmore. He has striven to hide his destitution under an assumed name, just as his wife has kept the secret of an imprudent marriage by retaining a false address. Either mystery may be discovered at any moment, so various are the accidents of life.

"Don't consider me frivolous if I remind you that I haven't eaten anything since half-past eight this morning, and the perambulation of stony-hearted London is conducive to an inward craving. I won't call the feeling by so healthy a name as hunger. It's a compound sensation of sickness and emptiness. Is there anything to eat except bread and butter? It's a very nice thing in its way, but one comes to object to it on the same ground that Louis the Fourteenth's confessor took about partridges."

"Mrs. Bonny is broiling a haddock," replies Sibyl, listlessly.

"What good Catholics we are! keeping Advent all the week through. We had bloaters yesterday, and dried sprats the day before. All our days are Ember days."

"Fish is the cheapest thing I can get, Alex."

"No doubt, but it generally entails after expense in the way of an extra half-pint of beer. No matter. Let Mrs. Bonny bring forth the haddock," exclaimed Alexis, applying himself diligently to the toast, which Sibyl has just buttered.

She tinkles the bell gently, as a polite hint to Mrs. Bonny. She dare not give a peremptory ring, as she might for a servant whose wages she paid. Mrs. Bonny—when letting her lodgings—professes to give attendance to her lodgers, but that attendance is scanty, and yielded as a favour rather than a right. A lodger who wants extra luxuries, such as onion sauce with a shoulder of mutton, or fried liver and bacon for supper, must make things very sweet to Mrs. Bonny. An order for the theatre, or even an occasional tumbler of grog has a mollifying effect on her disposition; the loan of a newspaper soothes her sensitive mind. The Stanmores are too poor to offer even these small attentions, and are sometimes backward in the payment of their rent, and thus receive stinted service grudgingly given. Sibyl pours out the tea languidly, and with the air of a person out of health. She eats a little bread and butter, but without appetite, and when the haddock appears at last, borne by a slipshod girl, Mr. Stanmore has that fish all to himself, Sibyl refusing any portion thereof.

Alexis contemplates her pityingly — tenderly even;— that haggard, sickly look in the delicate face touches him.

"Poor girl, how pale and ill you look! No appetite too. That's a bad sign. I wish I could have brought you home something more tempting than this old finnan. A bird, a sweetbread, or something of that kind."

"I could not eat the most exquisite dinner that was ever cooked, Alex, so you needn't trouble yourself to regret that. But I do wish for something, very much."

"What is it, darling? You ought to have every wish gratified just now. You would, if you had married a rich cheesemonger, or a wharfinger, or a packer, or a cotton-spinner, or a brass-founder, anything except that lowest animal in the scale of creation, a broken-down swell. What is it, Sibyl?"

"I want ten pounds, Alex," she answers, intently, her elbow on the table, her chin supported by her hand, her eyes upon his face, attitude and expression alike earnest.

"Ten pounds, my dearest! We have been wanting ten pounds ever since our honeymoon."

"Don't speak of our honeymoon," exclaimed Sibyl, fretfully. "It maddens me when I think how you squandered money that might have kept us in comfort for a year."

"My love, you are so easily maddened," remonstrates Alexis, placidly—he has never been seen out of temper. "I dare say it was foolish to go the pace quite as fast as we did, but you had never seen Paris, and April in Paris with the woman one loves is the nearest approach that I can imagine to paradise."

"You speak as if you had tried it often," says Sibyl, with a sneer.

"Bah, child, a mere *façon de parler*. Do you remember our drives to the Cascade, in the balmy spring nights, when the stars were shining on the Bois, and how we used to sit in the lamp-lit gardens of the *café*, eating ices and making love? If ever we grow rich, Sibyl, we'll go back to Paris and have another honeymoon. But how about these ten pounds, little woman? What can you want with ten pounds?"

The young wife rises, glides behind her husband's chair, and, leaning on his shoulder, whispers something in his ear, a something at which he smiles tenderly, sadly, and, turning in his chair, draws the young face—so wan and yet so fair—down to his lips.

"By Jove!" he exclaims, "poor little woman, I am a brute, never to have thought of it. You want to buy clothes for the poor little beggar who is to make his first appearance upon the stage of life, before the innocent lambkins have begun to bleat in the meadows, undisputed heir to his father's impecuniosity. The lower animals have the advantage of us in that respect, by the by. The lambkins come into the world amply provided. You shall have the money, Sibyl. Yes, if I have to borrow, beg, rob for it. You shall have it somehow, even if I were driven to beg of my bitterest foe, ay, of Stephen Trenchard himself."

His arm is round her, and he feels her start at the name.

"Don't be frightened, little woman. That's only a figure of speech. I never saw Stephen Trenchard in my life, and as to begging of him, there's nothing more unlikely, since he is, to the best of my knowledge, an inhabitant of the city of palaces, otherwise Calcutta."

"He might have come back to England, Alex, without your knowing anything about it," suggests Sibyl.

"Ay, that might he have done easily, child, seeing that he is a very insignificant person in this big busy world, and that I know nothing whatever about him, except that he did me deadly wrong before I was born."

"And you were taught to hate him?"

"Yes verily, before I learned my catechism I learned to hate Stephen Trenchard with a righteous and a godly hate, for was he not the falsest and meanest of men? and the Scripture does not forbid us to hate falsehood and meanness. If Eve had hated the serpent a little, humanity in general would not have gone wrong. Trenchard was like the serpent, a creature that crawled, a wriggling worm in the guise of a man. He wriggled and wormed himself into the fortune that should have been my father's ; he wriggled and wormed himself into the heart of my father's first love ; and he did all this wrong,—deliberate wrong, mark you, basely conceived, the study of his days and nights, with a smiling face, clasping his victim's hand in friendship all the while, so that no thunderbolt falling from the skies could have surprised my father more than the discovery that his arch enemy was *there*, hiding under the mask of his humble friend."

Alexis has risen, and paces the room, fired by this memory of a lesson learned in earliest boyhood. As deeply as he loved his dead father, so deeply does he hate his father's enemy and betrayer. Sibyl watches him, thoughtful and perplexed. Of all things difficult to impossibility, nothing could seem more so than to reconcile her love and duty to her husband, and her desire to win her uncle's fortune.

CHAPTER II.

"O WORLD, THY SLIPPERY TURNS!"

Given a ten-pound note which must be had. Query, where to get it ? A problem not over-easy of solution for a man who has exhausted the generosity of those few friends who are generous, and discovered the hollowness of those numerous acquaintances who, not ill-natured in the beaten way of friendship, will do anything for a friend except open their purse-strings.

A sharp December morning. The wind has changed in the night from south-west to due east, and there has been a light fall of snow, which is whitening the various and picturesque roofs of Chelsea, and hangs on the ragged elm branches on Cheyne Walk. The river is dun colour, the sky iron-gray, as if the atmosphere were heavily charged with snow. Butchers' boys, cabmen, and those denizens of the street who seem to get through their daily round of labour with an ample margin of leisure for gossip and standing about at corners, look up at the darkened vault of heaven and opine that there will be a heavy fall of snow before night.

This is the cold world which Alexis Secretan faces, leaving his wife asleep in the old tent bed at number eleven, Dixon Street. She has fallen into slothful habits of late, pleading as her excuse that there is so little to get up for, now-a-days. Certainly not pleasure or prosperity, not even so much as a new book to read, for does not that ragged old "Don Juan," whose bitterest verses

Alexis gloats over in his gloomiest moods, constitute, with graceless "Tom Jones," the entire stock of literature in Sibyl Secretan's reach?

Ten pounds. He faces the bitter blast blowing up the river from Plumstead and Woolwich and all the chilly eastern marshes, and seeming to concentrate its biting power upon innocent Cheyne Walk, he faces the rasping wind moodily, puzzling out this insolvable problem, where to get ten pounds! Where to get it? that is the only question. The how to get it has been settled from the beginning. He must borrow it. He has almost outgrown the sense of degradation which accompanies the earlier stages of the borrower's piteous career,—he has almost reached the lower depth of the hardy and habitual borrower. He has but to settle with himself upon whom he shall make his demand. For himself he might perchance never have stooped to borrow. He would have emigrated rather, and lived by the sweat of his brow in some new country where men are equal, and poverty less than a crime; or, his heart failing him, he might have flung himself and his difficulties off Waterloo Bridge, and so made an easy end of them; but with a young and beloved wife dependent on him for daily bread he has sacrificed pride and independence, manhood and honesty even, he sometimes thinks, and for the last six months has lived a wretched hand-to-mouth existence, trying to get employment all the time, and occasionally earning a fortuitous five-pound note, but supporting the burden of life for the most part by the aid of loans obtained from the associates of happier days. He is not a man upon whom so pitiful a position sits lightly; though—being gifted by nature with a peculiarly sweet and easy temper—he has a way of taking his troubles placidly, especially in the presence of his wife, and his railings at Fate and Fortune, though frequent, are philosophical rather than angry or vindictive. He is a man who, if Nature's bounties are to be counted as a heritage, is not undowered. Eminently handsome, of a noble presence, athletic, with a constitution to which illness and disease are unknown—with a voice that can soothe or charm, threaten or command—an eye that dominates man and the lesser animals alike—a quick, bright intellect—a wondrous power of endurance—that noble quality which in a horse we call "stay," which in man is perhaps the crowning characteristic of manhood,—with such gifts as these, Alexis Secretan should hardly count himself ill furnished for the battle of life. Unhappily, the old fairy story of the Princess's christening gifts repeats itself more or less in every man's life. Among the numerous good fairies who were invisible guests at Alexis Secretan's baptismal feast two evil fairies slipped in unawares. These were Poverty and Unthrift.

"He shall have little of this world's goods," said the first.

"And he shall squander that little," added the second.

This baptismal curse has been fulfilled. The only son of a disinherited father, Alexis has yet escaped the chastening influence of that sharp schoolmaster, Poverty. His mother's fortune was enough to support father and son in luxurious idleness, and in a happy-go-lucky, easy kind of life in foreign cities, where life is cheaper, gayer, and brighter than at home. At seventeen his father's influence was sufficient to obtain him a commission in a crack regiment. Father and mother died within a year of each other, and soon after Alexis had put on his epaulettes. The remnant of his mother's fortune—the bulk thereof having been anticipated, and made away with from year to year as necessity impelled—served to keep the young man going in an expensive profession for about five years, during which he had the good fortune to see some active service, distinguish himself by various displays of reckless daring, and obtain a captaincy. At the end of the fifth year he had spent the last shilling of his capital, and was in debt. Knowing the impossibility of living on his pay, he sold out, and for some time—about a year and a half—contrived to live upon the proceeds of his commission, having thus sacrificed his military career to the necessities of eighteen months' idleness, and to that miserable condition of a noble profession which makes it impossible that a gentleman should live by his sword.

Alexis reviews the ranks of his acquaintances as he walks Londonwards. He has exhausted the bounty of his easy-going, and, in some cases, open-handed brother officers. No hope of help there. His foreign education has left him without school friends near at hand. Honest Max, or jovial Fritz of Heidelberg might advance him a thaler—or a handful of groschen—were they within reach, but their normal state is impecuniosity.

There is but one source left undrained. Even in this depth of destitution he has not yet appealed to his mother's sole surviving sister, his aunt Louisa, co-heiress with his mother of a rich Manchester manufacturer, and more fortunately married than his mother. Aunt Louisa is the wife of Dudley Gorsuch, barrister, in large practice, and member for Glaseford, in the Potteries, a self-made man, self-important, and worshipping rank and mammon, as the Ammonites worshipped Moloch. On this bleak December morning it occurs to Alexis that aunt Louisa, being of his mother's kin, must have some green spot in her nature, some place in her heart accessible to softer feeling, were it but the size of a pin's point, and that he, her nephew, destitute and forlorn, ought to be able to find that place.

He has dined at her house when he was a dashing young officer, well dressed, well surrounded; has been entertained bounteously by her, made much of, presented to her friends with some touch of pride, being verily a young man for women to be proud of in his prosperous days. At that happier time aunt Louisa appeared to him worldly, but good-natured, hospitable, benevolent even.

He is at the bottom of Grosvenor Place by this time, and has made up his mind to try aunt Louisa.

Mr. and Mrs. Gorsuch live in a street out of Grosvenor Place, too expensive a street for Mr. Gorsuch's means, which are larger in appearance than reality; but a fine house in a fine neighbourhood is a standing evidence of wealth, and as such is worth all it costs. There are so many things in which prudent careful people can save money; notably in their meals and the food they give their servants, since these matters appertain to the inner economy of a household, and are secrets to the outer world. Mrs. Gorsuch pinches in all domestic details, even down to scouring-paper. Mr. Gorsuch gives three state dinners in the season, supplied by Gunter, banquets of imposing appearance, but washed down with wines that range from half a crown to four and sixpence per bottle.

Alexis, fully aware of his broken-down appearance, is too wise to put forward his relationship as a claim to be admitted, despite the footman's suspicious look.

He simply asks to see Mrs. Gorsuch, but he gives his real name, Mr. Secretan.

He is left in the hall while the footman communicates with his mistress, whose voice is heard in the library at the back of the hall.

"She can hardly deny herself when I can hear her talking," thinks Alexis.

She does not deny herself. The man ushers him into the library—a square apartment with a gloomy outlook, and two pompous bookcases, containing law books, and a few of those classic authors whose works are more largely bought than read.

A fire burns frostily and cheerily in the bright steel grate. Mrs. Gorsuch sits at a table, with a row of tradesmen's books and a ponderous plated inkstand before her. She has been trying to reconcile discrepancies between the butcher's account of meat delivered and her own idea of the meat that ought to have been consumed. Three pounds of rump steak sit heavily upon her soul. She cannot see how these three pounds of butcher's meat can have been honestly eaten, and she is haunted by the image of an all-devouring policeman—or those blood-suckers, the cook's relatives.

She is a little dried-up looking woman, with stiff bands of light auburn hair, pepper-castored with gray; a brown merino gown, a pinched-looking lace cap, and a double eye-glass attached to a chain which glitters in the rosy light of the fire, as she turns to look at her visitor, glass in hand.

"Alex!" she exclaims, "Good heavens, what a change."

She saw him last as a guest at one of her state dinners, elegant, prosperous-looking, with the easy, self-assured air of a man certain of success in life. She sees him now reduced to the lowest ebb in the tide of man's existence. He comes to her as a beggar. Mendicancy is written on his face.

"Yes, there's a marked decadence from the young man about town, is there not?" he replies. "You see the brand which Destitution stamps upon her children. I have fallen very low in the world since I used to come to your swell parties. You were very kind to me in those days, aunt,"—Mrs. Gorsuch winces, knowing so well what is coming—"so kind that I have made up my mind to sue for a small kindness to-day. It goes against the grain, but——"

"Before we talk about kindnesses, Alexis, perhaps you will be good enough to explain how you have sunk to this absolutely disreputable condition?" asked Mrs. Gorsuch, looking at her nephew's boots.

"The easiest thing in the world," answers Alexis, with agreeable recklessness. "I have spent all my money, and have not yet acquired the knack of earning more."

He sees, dimly, that there is little to be hoped from this flesh and blood of his, and that placid despair which is his normal condition enables him to take things easily.

"Earning!" echoes aunt Louisa with a bitter sneer. "It isn't in any of your race to earn the bread they eat. My father made his fortune by honest industry, your father thought he honoured our family when he exchanged his landless gentility for my sister's thirty thousand pounds. Poor Maud! it was a luckless day that brought him across her path."

"Reserve your pity, aunt Louisa. My mother's married life was a happy one. I can bear witness to that."

"Happy!" exclaims Mrs. Gorsuch, contemptuously. "Was she in society?"

This question she evidently considers unanswerable. Alexis respects her opinion, and makes no reply.

"Can you compare her position with mine?"

"Certainly not. You have a handsome house in a fashionable street, a bishop for your right-hand neighbour, an earl on your left hand. You have the orthodox establishment of a lady, and all the cares that accompany it. My mother lived a roving life in some of the loveliest places of this earth, and had no servant but the maid who waited on her when she was well and nursed her when she was ill, and loved her dearly always. My mother's society consisted of the few friends who were faithful to her through all changes of fortune. Those do not count, of course. No, she was not in society; but perhaps when you and she compare notes as to your earthly experiences in a wiser world you may find that the balance has been more evenly adjusted than you suppose now."

Mrs. Gorsuch has hardly heard him. Her mind is troubled by a grave doubt.

"I hope you did not tell the butler that you are my nephew," she says, anxiously.

"I had too much discretion for that. And now, aunt, not wishing to intrude myself or my boots (he has perceived her uneasy glances at those patched offenders against the decencies of life) upon you longer than is absolutely necessary, I will come to the point. Will you lend me, or give me, ten pounds? If Fate is against me you may call it a gift, but if Fortune favour me it shall be repaid tenfold. I needn't tell you how badly I want money. My appearance testifies to my necessities, but it is not for myself that I am a beggar. It is for my wife, soon to become a mother."

"What?" almost shrieks Mrs. Gorsuch. "Married! Without income or profession, you have linked yourself to some unhappy creature?"

"Yes, we have taken the liberty to unite our destitution. If the worst comes to the worst the same pan of charcoal that serves for one will accommodate the other."

"Your impiety shocks but does not surprise me," says Mrs. Gorsuch. "Such sinful imprudence could hardly be found in a man of religious principles."

"No, prudence and piety generally go in double harness. Well, aunt, I have my answer. You won't lend or give me the money?"

"In the first place, I have not such a sum to lend. Mr. Gorsuch's position demands the expenditure of our income. We are never in debt," with a shudder, "but we have never anything to spare. I had to strain every nerve in order to pay our annual contribution to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts."

"And you have nothing left for a starving nephew at home."

"Even if I were in a position to advance you this money—which I repeat I am not—I cannot see that your condition would be materially improved by the loan. Where would you be when the money was spent?"

"Exactly where I am now. The money is not for myself, but for my wife. I should not touch a sixpence of it."

"Who was this unfortunate young woman whom you married her?"

"Will you lend me ten pounds?" asks Alexis, ignoring the question.

"Sadly to be pitied, poor creature, whoever she was. Some young person of inferior position, I dare say."

"Will you lend me ten pounds?"

"I have already told you that I have no such sum at my disposal, Alexis," replies Mrs. Gorsuch. And then, hesitatingly, reluctantly extracting a coin from a plethoric-looking Russia leather purse, she adds, "If half a sovereign will be of some small assistance——"

"It won't," answered her nephew, abruptly. "I dare say I could make as much in a day by sweeping a crossing, and I shouldn't feel myself so degraded as if I took the money from you. Good-bye, aunt."

He has opened the door before he concludes, and aunt Louisa endures agonies for the rest of the day, fearful that the butler, or man of all work, heard that last address. Remorse for her treatment of her nephew troubles her not at all.

"He cannot say that I sent him away empty-handed," she reflects. "I offered him half a sovereign."

CHAPTER III.

THE TRUE METAL.

Alexis Secretan turns his back upon the solemn responsibilities of Tubal Street, Grosvenor Place, sick with anger and despair. He is angry with himself rather than with his aunt. He loathes himself for having invited such humiliation.

"I ought to have known her better," he muses. "A woman who gives showy dinners and cheap wines, and talks of her friend the Duchess of Landsend, or the Countess of John-o'-Groat; a woman whose name appears in the subscription list of all the orthodox charities, just under the nobility, and who never keeps a servant six months. And yet she is my mother's sister, of the same race; my mother, whose nature was all kindness, and with whom to give was as natural as to breathe."

He stands at Hyde Park Corner, indifferent to the east wind and the falling snow,—fine small snow-flakes that lie unmelted where they fall.

"Now which way shall I turn myself in search of a friendly soul?" he asks.

He turns south-westward, perhaps to escape that biting easterly blast, and walks towards Brompton, listlessly, hopelessly, walking fast to keep himself warm, but with no settled purpose.

Past the Bell and Horns Tavern he stops and looks up at one of the houses in the high road, a house with a front garden —or railed enclosure, which courtesy calls garden—a snowy parallelogram, in which flourishes four melancholy bushes, like dwarf cypresses in a graveyard. The house is neat and bright-looking, and a bill in the parlour window announces that apartments are to be let within.

Alexis opens the gate as if familiar with its structure, goes up to the door hesitatingly, knocks, and asks to see Mr. Plowden. He is ushered forthwith into the back parlour, where a man of about his own age, pale and thoughtful-looking, sits by an indifferent fire painting a map. A pile of unpainted maps, a battered old tin paint-box and brushes lie on the table before him. The thin white hand travels dexterously, rapidly over the paper, leaving a delicate line of colour behind it.

The map-painter looks up at Alexis, brush in hand, surveys him from head to foot, wonderingly, and drops the brush, full of colour, on the map.

"Captain Secretan!" he exclaims, "is it possible?"

"It's true, at any rate," answers Alexis, holding out his hand, which the other grasps affectionately. "Theoretically impossible, perhaps, but absolutely true. Just wash off that splash of cobalt, Dick. I shouldn't like you to spoil one of your maps on my account."

"I'm so glad to see you," says Richard Plowden, dabbing the map with a sponge rather nervously. "I was afraid you'd quite forgotten me, and that we should never see you here again, either as a lodger or a friend. However, here you are, and I'm heartily glad to see you," poking the dingy little fire vigorously, and then holding out his hand again to Alexis; "but I'm afraid things haven't been going so well with you as they ought. You look——"

"Poor," interjects Alexis. "You're not far out. Poverty and small-pox are unmistakable diseases. You can see them in a man's face. Before you say another kind word to me, Dick, I must tell you the truth—the naked, unpleasant truth. I come to you as a beggar. Knowing how hard you work for every shilling you earn—knowing what a good fellow you are—good son, good friend, good Christian—I am mean enough to come here and ask you to help me. The worthless drone appeals to the honest, independent bee."

"So far as I can help you," replies Mr. Plowden, with undiminished kindliness, "I am at your service. You were a profitable lodger to my mother, and a kind friend to me. It isn't many gentlemen in your position who would have condescended to associate with a lame invalid, who gets his living by painting maps. I know those evenings when you used to come and smoke your pipe down here were some of the happiest in my life."

He walks about the room as he speaks, drags a chair to the fireside for Alexis, takes a loaf of bread, a bottle of anchovies, a pat of butter, and a bottle of ginger wine out of the chiffonier, spreads a napkin, and arranges this temperate refreshment on one side of the table, pushing his maps and colour-box to the other. He walks lame, but is active and hardy notwithstanding.

"Do you suppose I should have spent many evenings with you if I had not found your company pleasant, Dick?" says Alexis, lightly. "I found that you had read more and thought more than any fellow of my acquaintance, and it was refreshing to me to hear your ideas upon all manner of subjects. And then I flattered myself that you liked me, and were pleased with my talk of the gay world; above all, about that stage you love so well and see so little of. Do you remember how we used to discuss the actors of the day, Dick, and settle how Shakespeare ought to be interpreted?"

"Do you think I can ever forget?" asks Richard Plowden. "I've not so many friends that I can afford to forget the one who was the first to tell me I had a mind. Do you know, Captain Secretan, that I've had the impertinence to write a book since then? Do peg into those anchovies, captain, and don't mind cutting the knobs off the loaf. I like crumb as well as crust."

"A book, Dick. An essay on the genius of Shakespeare!"

"Nothing so ambitious, or so unlikely to sell. A geography for schools, on a new system. It is not published yet, but I have reason to believe that it will be, and that I shall make a little money by it. So you may have less compunction in borrowing a pound or two."

"Dear old Dick!" exclaims Alexis, who has been doing ample justice to the anchovies and bread and butter, and warming himself with a glass of ginger wine. "Unhappily, it is not a question of a pound or two. I want ten pounds."

Richard Plowden's countenance falls. It is not that he would measure his friendship, but ten pounds is an awful sum.

"If I ever can repay it I will, and with interest at a more than usurious rate. But it is almost a mockery to talk of repayment in my present condition."

Richard limps to the chiffonier without a word, takes out a little japanned cash-box, unlocks it, and extracts therefrom a five-pound note and five sovereigns.

"I had the money ready for the Christmas rent," he says, "but you are welcome to it. We shall be able to rub along without it, I dare say."

What pinching and deprivation this rubbing along process will cost, Alexis can pretty well guess, for he has seen how the widow Plowden and her son live at the best of times.

He takes the money with a faltering hand, and turns away his face to hide the tears that disfigure it, the first that he has shed since he wept for his mother's death.

Presently he grows cheerful again, resumes his seat, finishes his luncheon, and then tells Richard Plowden the story of his decadence, an unvarnished tale which his humble friend hears with deepest interest.

"If you could put me in the way of earning a few shillings a week by any kind of labour, however humble, you would be doing me even a greater favour than you have done me this day; and yet, knowing your circumstances as I do, I feel as if you had given me ten years of your life instead of ten pounds."

Richard Plowden promises that he will turn the matter over in his mind, and see what he can do, and so the two young men part, as firm friends as in the days when Mrs. Plowden's first-floor lodger, the dashing young captain, was the object of her son's affectionate admiration, his ideal of all that is noble and splendid in manhood.

CHAPTER IV.

"HAD THE CHANCE BEEN WITH US THAT HAS NOT BEEN."

Alexis speeds homeward joyously, elate as if he had conquered fortune. He has borrowed money from a social inferior, and yet does not feel humiliated. That interview with Richard Plowden has cheered him wondrously. The patient, gentle soul working at monotonous task-work in a gloomy back parlour, with no outlook save blank wall and cistern, working uncomplainingly, nay, even cheerfully, has read him a lesson. There must be work for a strong, healthy fellow like himself when a cripple in a back room can earn his living. Alexis begins to think he has tried life at the wrong end, that in striving for some shabby-genteel, reduced-gentleman's occupation, he has overlooked those lowlier and less sophisticated avocations which offer themselves to every honest man.

"We'll emigrate as soon as the little woman is strong enough for a sea voyage," he tells himself, "and I'll turn shepherd on the Australian downs."

Sibyl receives him with an eager look, full of questioning. She is sitting on the hearth-rug as he comes into the room, in her favourite attitude, looking into the fire, her ruffled hair golden in the ruddy light, her eyes heavy with thought or care.

His elated aspect tells her that he has been successful. She rises and runs to him, trembling with anxiety.

"Have you got the money?"

"Yes, Sibyl. Of all my friends, the one who could least afford to lose it was the only one to lend it. Here it is, little one. You must make it go a long way, for it has cost me sore humiliation."

"It was lent grudgingly, then?"

"No; but it was refused heartlessly by the wrong person before I hit upon the right one. Make the most of it, my love, now you've got it."

His wife takes the little parcel of money from his hand, slowly, looking downward, and without a word.

"You are pleased, little woman?"

"It was very good of you to try so hard," she answers in a low voice.

She begins to busy herself about her husband's dinner without another word. This evening she gives him half a pound of rump-steak, an unwonted feast, at which his soul rejoices.

"I am faring sumptuously to-day," he says, as she sits opposite to him, pouring out the tea with a listless, absent air, which he takes for physical languor. "I have had a superb luncheon already."

All that evening Sibyl is unwontedly silent, and Alexis, not caring to describe his interview with Mrs. Gorsuch, had not much to tell her after he has related Richard Plowden's generosity. He has recourse to the tattered leaves of "Don Juan," and sits sniggering over his favourite passages, and feeling as if he and the poet were both outside the human race generally, and could afford to ridicule and despise it.

He sallies forth early next morning, despite the snow, which now clothes the land as a garment, and goes straight to Brompton, to have another cheery talk with Dick Plowden, and to inquire whether that back-parlour philosopher has hit upon any method by which he, Alexis, may earn his daily bread.

Richard is hopeful. He has an uncle engaged in a large shipping agent's office, an uncle who would have obtained employment for Richard himself, had Richard's legs been more serviceable in active life. To this uncle, Mr. Sampson Plowden, Dick writes a long letter, setting forth his friend's capacities and desire for employment; and, armed with this recommendation, Alexis speeds to the offices of Messrs. Keel and Skrew, in a narrow alley out of Fenchurch Street. He sees Sampson Plowden, an active little elderly man, who asks if he can write a good hand, and if he is quick at accounts. Alexis asks for a sheet of paper, and writes a few lines in a clerk-like hand, taking care to dot his i's this time, and then volunteers to solve any arithmetical puzzle that Mr. Plowden likes to set him.

"Well, I'll take your word and Dick's as to the book-keeping," replies Mr. Plowden. "We employ a good many clerks, and sometimes have to send one to Australia, which makes a vacancy.

The next time this occurs you shall hear of it. The junior clerks are in my department, and it's in my province to engage or dismiss them. I'll bear you in mind, Mr. Stanmore.

"If you could send me to Australia," hazards Alexis, glowing with hope, "it would suit me admirably."

"Well, well, that would be a matter involving much consideration. However, you shall hear from me at the first opportunity."

This is not much, but it is something; for Mr. Plowden looks like a man who means what he says, and Dick has given him a high character for integrity and kindness of heart. Alexis plods homewards, cheered and sustained by sorrow's pole-star, Hope.

He lets himself in at number eleven, Dixon Street, the door being on the latch, and goes upstairs, prepared to find Sibyl in a brighter frame of mind than usual, busy at her needlework most likely, the lamp burning, the hearth swept, the evening meal set out, with neatness which lends its charm even to poverty.

The room looks curiously blank and dreary as he enters it. The fire has gone out; cheerless sight, with that white world outside, and the thermometer below freezing-point. There is no tea-tray, no white cloth on the table, no lamp burning. The dusk is just light enough to show him that the room is empty, and that no preparation has been made for his refreshment.

He goes back to the landing and calls over the balusters to his landlady—"Has my wife been out long, Mrs. Bonny?"

"She went out just before dinner-time," screams a voice from below.

Dinner-time with Mrs. Bonny means one o'clock.

"She has gone to buy things, I dare say," thinks Alexis; "gone to London most likely. She ought to have been home by half-past four, though, if she went as early as one. Did she leave any message, Mrs. Bonny?" he asks, calling over the balusters again.

"No," replies the landlady, curtly, "she didn't leave no message, but she took a carpet bag."

"A carpet bag," repeats Alexis, with a puzzled air, as he goes back to the blank, cold room. "What could she want with a carpet bag? To bring the things home, perhaps, foolish little thing! As if a parcel wasn't lighter to carry than a carpet bag."

He gropes for wood and coals in the bottom of the roomy cupboard, and lights a fire, patiently, toilfully, not unskilfully, with hands which have learned many offices unknown to the elegant Captain Secretan.

He is dispirited by his wife's absence, but not angry. That placid, easy temper of his is full of tenderness and indulgence for the "little woman" whose brief married life has been so full of care, who approaches the mystery of maternity under such sorrowful conditions. He lights his fire, brings out a loaf, a starveling slice of cheese, and some small-beer in a bottle, and sits by the hearth to eat his meal in the firelight. As he eats and drinks his eyes wander thoughtfully round the firelit room, jets of flame flashing and twinkling on the wainscot.

"Not a bad old room by any means," he thinks, "if one had just enough money to live in it comfortably?"

He fancies that in Sampson Plowden's friendship he has found the clue that shall extricate him from the maze of adversity. How happy Sibyl and he might be in this humble old room were he but employed as clerk at Messrs. Keel and Skrew's with a salary of, say thirty shillings a week. Not an ambitious desire, surely, in a young man whose family history is set forth with some flourish in Burke's "Landed Gentry."

"I shall have something pleasant to tell the little woman when she comes home, at any rate," thinks Alexis, as he sips the flat fourpenny ale, put carefully away after last night's supper.

A pert little flame spurts out of a knob of coal just at this moment, brightening the whole room, and Secretan's eye, wandering idly as he muses, is attracted by a spot of white upon the sideboard.

"A letter, by Jove!" he exclaims. "Who the deuce can have written to me, when not a mortal knows my address?"

He rises—listlessly—apprehending no advantage from the letter, lights the lamp, and goes over to the sideboard. The letter is from his wife.

"Dear Alexis,

"Our misery of the last few months has opened my eyes to the sad truth that it would have been far better for both of us had we never met, or had we been wise enough to defer our marriage till we had some settled means of living. What am I but a burden to you? How many situations there are in which you could get your living were you alone and unfettered! while I could at least return to the dull drudgery of teaching, and escape the pinch of absolute poverty. Do not think me cold-hearted, dear Alexis, when I tell you that I am weary of our continual struggle, and that I have resolved to end it by an act which may provoke your indignation, but which, I feel assured, will result in your advantage. I set you free from the burden of a wife whom you have found it too bitter a task to support. You have rarely uttered a complaint, but I have seen despair in your face often enough to learn that it has settled in your heart. Without me you may begin the world afresh. Apart from you I shall have opportunities of prosperity as Miss Faunthorpe, which I could never have as Mrs. Secretan. If my lot changes, and fortune smiles, as I dare to hope it will, you shall hear of me; and even if you blame me for a separation which your anger may call a desertion, believe at least that in severance as in union, I shall be ever your true and loyal wife, Sibyl."

Alexis reads and re-reads this letter like a man who has lost the power of understanding his mother tongue, and pores over familiar words as though they were the hieroglyphics of an Assyrian inscription.

So cold, so heartless, so deliberate. His heart sickens at the thought of such cruelty. In all his adversity, with starvation staring him in the face, he has thought of his wife as part of himself; has never considered the responsibility of providing for her as doubling the difficulty of existence; has never for a moment remembered that life might be easier to him without her. He has been sorry for her, has thought of her deprivations, her endurance, but of the burden upon himself—never. All hopes and dreams of a happier future have centred themselves in her. To win a brighter home for her, to surround her with comfort, has been his one ambition. Reckless as his marriage was, he has never repented it. Fettered hand and foot as he has found himself by that ill-considered act, he has never wished the tie loosened.

He stands with the letter in his hand repeating the words to himself incredulously. It must be a jest—a trick to test his love —anything but the base and bitter truth.

He puts the letter in his pocket at last, goes downstairs, and penetrates the sacred domain of Mrs. Bonny; namely, the front kitchen, which is at once the parlour or living-room, where Mr. Bonny, employed as a railway porter, tastes the sweets of domestic leisure, and the apartment in which Mrs. Bonny cooks for her lodgers. The back kitchen makes a cheerful bedroom, and in summer-time, when Mr. Bonny trains scarlet runners over the window, enjoys a rustic outlook.

Alexis is received somewhat coldly by Mrs. Bonny, that lady being intent upon frying sausages for the railway porter's evening repast and resenting all intrusion upon her private domain on principle. He questions her closely as to the mode and manner of his wife's departure, but she can tell him no more than she has told him already. Mrs. Stanmore went out between twelve and one o'clock, carrying a small carpet bag.

"I shouldn't have known anything about it if I hadn't happened to meet her as I was fetching of the dinner beer, our Mary Ann being washing, and no one else to fetch it."

"Did she say nothing to you?"

"Not a word; she just gives me a nod, in her off hand way, and walks on."

That is all. Alexis goes upstairs again, heavily, slowly, and paces the deserted room. By-and-by he pauses before a rickety old chest of drawers with brass handles and locks, opens a drawer, and finds it empty. It is the drawer that contained his wife's poor remains of a wardrobe that had never been richly furnished a few under garments, a collar or two, and so on. These she has evidently taken with her. Nothing could have been more deliberate than her departure.

Presently a curious idea occurs to him, improbable, but it takes a strong hold upon him nevertheless.

Has she gone to make away with herself? and is this heartless letter of hers a tender device to save him the pain of knowing that she had been driven by despair to suicide?

This seems to him more likely, more natural than that the wife he loves can desert him; can, with coldest calculation, barter love and truth against the chances of prosperity.

What those chances are he knows not. He is so ignorant of his wife's family and surroundings as not to know that Sibyl Faunthorpe is the niece of Stephen Trenchard.

Why he is thus unenlightened is a question that can be only answered by a retrospect, and will be best answered in Sibyl's own words.

CHAPTER V.

SIBYL FAUNTHORPE'S DIARY.

Lowther Street, November 14, 186—. I suppose to keep a diary is about as foolish a thing as any one can do—waste of time in the present, and self-abasement in the future. I dare say I shall hate myself when I read over these pages in years to come, and see what a stupid creature I was at nineteen years of age. However, I am driven to scribble about myself and my feelings for want of anything better to do in the long, lonely evenings, when the children are gone to bed, and Mrs. Hazleton is out, and I have the dreary schoolroom all to myself. I used to read any novel I could find lying about downstairs, and bring up here for an evening, till Mrs. Hazleton found me out and forbade it. "Novels, my dear Miss Faunthorpe," she preached, "are the worst possible reading for a young woman in your position—enervating the mind, weakening the logical faculty, which in your brain I regret to say is sorely deficient." I felt inclined to ask her why she reads novels if they are so injurious. She has a knack of reading one's thoughts, and answered my objection before I could give it expression. "For the head of a household, who must always have some portion of care and anxiety, novel-reading is an innocent relaxation; but the instructor of youth should employ her leisure in widening her circle of knowledge. The books in the study bookcase are quite at your service, Miss Faunthorpe, whenever you like to avail yourself of them," and then she sailed out of the room to go to a dinner party, dressed in maroon velvet and old Brussels lace, and looking very handsome—for an old woman. She must be five-and forty at the least.

Perhaps I ought not to complain of my bondage, for I might be worse off than I am. Mrs. Hazleton is fond of preaching, but she is not unkind to me. She has no grown-up daughters, and whenever she has company I am asked down to the drawing-room to play and sing and make myself generally useful; and as she has a good deal of company, this happens tolerably often. Luckily, music is my strong point. When Mrs. Hazleton is in a good humour she takes me for a drive in the park, and I see the world and hear what is going on. I go to a fashionable church with the children on Sundays and Saints' days, and am altogether much better off than in my uncle Robert's poverty-stricken household, in dull old Redcastle, where I knew no one worth knowing, and where life is only another name for vegetation. I am sure the cabbages in uncle's wretched kitchen-garden had quite as much enjoyment of life as Marion and I—more indeed, for they had sunshine and perpetual idleness, and bees and butterflies buzzing and skimming about them, while we had old house-linen to patch and darn, and the tradesmen's books to puzzle over, and Jenny to teach, and mend for, and scold, and puddings to make, and buttons to sew on from January to December. I think there never was such a man as uncle Robert for wrenching the buttons off his shirts, and pushing his toes through his socks.

So, at the worst, though I have to grind French, Italian, and German verbs in a mill all the week through, and listen to those wretched children strumming Kalkbrenner's exercises three hours a day, I am better off than Marion. I have forty pounds a year to spend upon clothes, and I see a great many nice people. Mrs. Hazleton boasts that she only knows the best people. "I am no tuft-hunter, my dear," she tells me when she is in one of her expansive moods. "You will see very few titles in my card-basket; but the people I know belong to some of the best families in England."

December 3.—Such a tiresome, dreary week. Mrs. Hazleton has dined out four evenings out of six, and now on the fifth she has taken off the children to see the new actor at the Haymarket. "I am sorry there won't be room for you in the box, Miss Faunthorpe," she said, with her chilly politeness, after I had been toiling for an hour helping Moyson, the children's maid, to tie Lucinda's ribbons, and brush Laura's hair, and sew on a tucker for Magdalen. So here I am at half-past seven o'clock, my hearth swept, and my fire made up, as solitary as an old maid with a small annuity.

I have been down to the study, and chosen a couple of volumes, the best I could find in a dry-as-dust collection of antiquities—the "Citizen of the World" and a volume of the *Spectator*,—but I don't feel equal to reading either. It suits my present humour better to scribble my complaints against fortune in this ridiculous book of mine. What a lucky woman Mrs. Hazleton is! Married to a wealthy Indian judge, and left a widow six years ago with an ample fortune; too old to care about marrying again, but not too old to be admired and made much of by her friends; her children young enough to be kept in the schoolroom for the next four years. Impossible to imagine a more independent position. What a contrast between her fate and mine! I have never known what it is to have my own way, and yet, when I was a child, I thought I had only to be "grown up" in order to taste all the sweets of life. Perhaps that was because of the nonsense people talked about my good looks. I can fancy no greater misfortune for a girl in my position than to be brought up with the idea of being a beauty. When I was a little thing people were always drawing comparisons between Marion and me to Marion's disadvantage; and before I was twelve I knew quite well that I was the pretty Miss Faunthorpe. Even old Hester, who never had a civil word for me at the best of times, used to feed my vanity with her taunts about my pretty face and my uselessness. "Handsome is that handsome does," she used to say, by which I knew very well that she thought me handsome. Then came school, and I was set up as a beauty, and courted and petted by one-half of the girls, and detested by the other half, and nagged at by Marion, who was set against me by the disagreeable comparisons people were always making between us. What was the consequence of all this? I grew up with the idea that as soon as I left school, some rich young man, handsome and agreeable into the bargain, would fall in love with me at first sight, and that I should be married in grand style at the parish church—six bridesmaids and ever so many carriages and pairs—before the admiring eyes of all Redcastle. I came home to uncle Robert's dull red house, prepared for conquest. Life would be like a fairy tale. Some fine summer morning the handsome young prince would appear, and I should be raised at once from Cinderella's obscurity to Cinderella's high fortune. Foolish creature that I was! I used to lay awake at night telling Marion the grand things I would do for her when I was married.

"Where is the prince to come from, Sib?" she asked me once, rather maliciously. "You know there are not above three such young men in Redcastle—young Taylor, the lawyer's son; Mr. Lacy, the biscuit manufacturer; and George Pinsford, the coachmaker."

"Biscuit manufacturer!" I exclaimed. "Do you suppose I would marry a low tradesman? Aren't there the county families, stupid?"

Well, here I am, after two weary years' home life with uncle Robert, who I must say is the dearest old thing in the world. Here I am, nearly twenty, and no nearer finding the prince of fairy lore than when I left Miss Wornie's establishment for young ladies at Kilmorden, after three years' experience as pupil-teacher. Here I am, a poor drudge of a governess, at just ten pounds a quarter, thankful for being asked down to the drawing-room, where my beauty goes for very little. All Mrs. Hazleton's friends have found out by this time that I am "only the governess," and have left off asking one another who I am, as they used to do at first with some show of interest. I sing, or play, and some one who has been chattering the whole time says languidly, "Very nice, really. *Thank* you, Miss Faunthorpe." And I sit in the angle between the back drawing-room fireplace and the window-curtain for the rest of the evening, watching and listening, with no more part in what is going on than if I were at a theatre.

Let me look in the glass and see what this lauded beauty is which has brought me so little luck. A small straight nose very sharply cut, a short upper lip, under lip a thought too full, eeth good, chin round and dimpled, face a perfect oval, eyes arkest brown; the sort of eyes which, I believe, are usually alled black. Hair dark brown, with a tinge of gold where it ipples—the colour usually called chestnut. Present expression iscontent and a tendency to ill temper.

I have given up that foolish notion of a rich husband, but I someimes indulge in another day-dream, perhaps just as foolish. What f my rich uncle, Stephen Trenchard, were to come home, take a ancy to me, and leave me a fortune? Such things have hapened. I remember how my poor mother used to talk of her rother Stephen, the Indian merchant, and of the ship that was oming home to bring her ease and comfort, and which never ame. Will the ship come home for me, I wonder, now that my oor mother has been lying ten years in her quiet grave?

December 13.—The most wonderful thing has happened—the ost unlooked for, the most extraordinary. My heart beats so ast at the mere thought of it, that I am almost breathless as I rite these lines My hand trembles, and the letters look blurred nd dim before my eyes.

I have seen the son of Philip Secretan, my uncle Stephen's eadly enemy—the man whom he supplanted in the affections of weak old father—for surely any father must be weak who ould disinherit his son in favour of a dependant, the man from hom he received the injury that lamed him for life. How often have I heard my mother tell the story, always putting her brother's conduct in the most favourable light! He was honest, indefatigable, steady—a favourite clerk in the firm of Secretan Brothers, Manchester merchants. He fully deserved the unexpected fortune that came to him, while Philip's dissipation and extravagance were justly rewarded by disinheritance. Yet somehow in spite of poor mamma's special pleading, my sympathy was always with this unfortunate Mr. Secretan, who saw his father's wealth pass into the possession of his father's confidential clerk.

I once asked mamma what kind of a man this Philip Secretan was. She told me that she had only seen him once in her life, but that he impressed her as being remarkably handsome and a perfect gentleman.

And now I have seen his son, Captain Secretan. He was at Mrs. Hazleton's party last night. I had no idea who he was till afterwards. He was standing before the fireplace in the back drawing-room when I went back to my corner after singing "Porghi Amor," standing with his back to the fire talking to old Colonel Syceman. He is tall and strong-looking, and has, to my mind, a most beautiful countenance. I never called a man beautiful before, and I dare say I shall laugh at the expression when I read over this stupid diary some day; but I cannot call his face less than beautiful. It is such a noble face, with just the grand look I could fancy in Achilles. I was reading Pope's "Iliad" to the children this afternoon, and I thought of Captain Secretan every time Achilles spoke. It seemed to me almost as if I could see him standing up before me, confronting Agamemnon. He is dark, with boldly cut features, a good-humoured expression about the mouth, and a somewhat dreamy look in the dark gray eyes. I have seen handsomer faces, but none that ever interested me as deeply. He is a man I should believe in with all my soul if he were my friend; a man I should lean upon as on a rock of defence if he were of my kindred. But he is nothing to me, and I am hardly likely to see him again.

Mrs. Hazleton spoke of him at luncheon to-day as a foolish young fellow who has sold his commission, and whose future career must be disastrous unless some distant relations were to die and leave him their property. As a rule, distant relations are not so obliging. She spoke with her reverential tone of his family, which is one of the oldest in Hampshire, although his grandfather was a Manchester merchant; and she informed me that his first cousin, once removed, is a baronet, Sir Douglas Secretan, with a large estate in somewhere or other.

I wonder whether I shall ever see him again.

December 30.—I have seen him again, three, four, five, six, seven times. Three times in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, three times in the park, when I was out walking with the children; and once in Desmond Street when I had gone out alone to post a letter.

I dare say it was very wrong, and that I shall be ashamed of myself when I read over this dreadful diary, but when Captain Secretan asked me whether I ever walked in the park with the children, I said yes; and when he askad me what time, I said between three and five; and after that, when he asked me if I ever went out alone, I told him yes, sometimes, just before half-past five, to post my home letter.

How kind he is! how clever! how interesting! and how well we seem to know each other, though we have only met seven times! There is evidently no association for him in the name of Faunthorpe. This is only natural, as my mother did not marry till some years after her brother's quarrel with Philip Secretan. How much I regret, now, that I did not learn the exact particulars of that quarrel! I have only a vague idea of the circumstances; but from what my mother told me, I know that, although Philip Secretan was the sufferer, my uncle Stephen was as vindictive as if he also had been injured.

Perhaps the injurer is sometimes more angry than the injured. My mother always declared that her brother was innocent of guile or wrong-doing from first to last, but now that I know Mr. Secretan's son I feel still more inclined to side with my uncle's enemy.

He, Captain Secretan, has told me the history of his life, his careless happy youth spent abroad, with a father and mother whom he idolized. He was educated at Heidelberg, came from Heidelberg to Woolwich, to an army tutor, joined his regiment at twenty, and sold out after five years' service, a few months ago. He has now all the world before him, he says, and has only to choose a career. He is energetic and clever, and can hardly miss success in anything he may attempt.

How changed our walks seem, now that there is always the chance of meeting him! As I see him coming to meet us along the wintry avenue, the familiar scene seems to grow beautiful, the sun hines brighter, the birds break out into singing. They may have been singing before, perhaps, and I too absorbed to hear them; but it seems as if they began a glad chorus at his coming. I did not think that winter afternoons could be so beautiful; the calm till air, the blue-gray sky, the black tracery of the tall elm trees gainst the yellow sunset.

He told me yesterday that his father would have been a rich man, but for the treachery of a friend whom he had loved and rusted. A cold, sick feeling came over me, just as if the treachery ad been mine, and I had suddenly come face to face with my ictim.

"The only lesson my father ever taught me was to revile that man's name, and to carry my hatred of him to the grave. An evil lesson for a kind-hearted man to teach, you'll say; but for all that, I don't believe there ever beat a kinder heart than my father's."

I can easily believe this. Kindness and sweet temper are Captain Secretan's chief characteristics; a bright good humour which cheers one like sunshine. A way of looking at life on the pleasantest side which would inspire hopefulness in the most dismal mind. I know how low-spirited, discontented, and wretched I was growing just before I knew him, and how changed and brightened life seems to me now.

The children doat upon him, and are as pleased as I am to meet him in our walks. He talks to them about all their small pleasures, and is able to interest himself in their ideas much better than I, who spend my life with them. Sometimes he paces up and down the broad walk with the three girls hanging about him, telling them one of the fairy tales we all know so well, and he has a way of giving a new charm and interest to the old stories, while his little touches of modern slang come in here and there with the funniest effect, and set us off laughing till the tree-tops seem to shake with our laughter.

"How odd that we should meet you again to-day, Captain Secretan!" cried Magdalen the day before yesterday, when we found him at the entrance of the broad walk.

"Not at all odd, if you insist on coming this way, little one," he said. "This is my afternoon constitutional. But if you very much object I'll take the other side of the park."

"Oh, no, no, please come always," shouted the three; and then they asked for Cinderella, Captain Secretan's modernized Cinderella, whose ball dress was made in New Bond Street, and whose cruel step-mother had a box on the second tier at Covent Garden.

It was yesterday afternoon that I met him in Desmond Street, a dreary drizzling afternoon, which made me think the sooner the year came to an end the better. I had been feeling rather depressed and disheartened all the morning. The children had all gone to a morning performance of the pantomime at Drury Lane, and I had the day to myself, as Mrs. Hazleton graciously informed me. I don't think leisure is an unalloyed good for those who have few pleasant thoughts to brighten their solitude. I sat mending my clothes, and thinking about Captain Secretan. My thoughts were not happy ones. I was shocked to find what a hold this stranger had taken upon my mind, and how difficult it was for me to think of any one else, or to imagine my life without him. Yet I knew that he was nothing, and never could be anything, to me. Poor, but proud, and of good birth, moving in what Mrs. Hazleton calls the best society, he will naturally select a woman of fortune for his wife. He is handsome, agreeable, has many gifts which distinguish him from the common run of young men, and will have no difficulty in making an advantageous marriage. Of an obscure little pauper like me he would never think seriously for a moment, unless his thoughts were dishonourable; and I know him and trust him well enough already to wager my life against that. What has he to do with me, then, or I with him? Absolutely nothing. We are only fooling each other by this friendship, which is so sweet to me, and which must needs have some charm for him, since he takes the trouble to cultivate it. Better for both of us that we should see each other no more, or only upon the public stage of Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room. I will tell him so seriously and honestly the next time we are alone together for a minute or two, while the hree girls march on before us. This doesn't often happen, for think Lucinda is more deeply in love with the captain han——! What was I going to write? Than a girl of twelve ught to be. This is the lecture which I read myself yesterday while I worked at that tiresome mending. All my Christmas uarter's salary will go for a black silk dress, as I must have one ood and fashionably made gown to wear downstairs. I wanted o much to have sent uncle Robert a little present, and I should ave liked to buy Marion a winter hat; but that is out of the uestion. Shall I have my dress made with flounces, or a trained kirt?

It was dark when I went out to post my letter; dark, and wet, nd uncomfortable, and there was nothing farther from my houghts than the idea of meeting Captain Secretan between owther Street and the post office, though I am bound to confess hat the captain himself was not very far from my thoughts. I ad posted my letter, and was coming away from the office, hen a tall man, looking very big in a great rough overcoat, rossed the road and came towards me. I knew him in a moment, ut a strange shy feeling came over me, and I walked on ever so ast, pretending not to know him. The street is quiet and lonely, nd I heard his footsteps hurrying after me.

"Do you always walk like a sporting pedestrian when you are one, Miss Faunthorpe?" he asked, coming by my side.

I started a little at the sound of his voice, although I knew so ell that he was there. Yesterday was one of my nervous days, suppose. I said something about its being such a disagreeable ening.

"Yes," he answered, with his good-tempered laugh, "the old ar is making himself as obnoxious as he can, in order that we ay not regret him. It is rather unpleasant weather. You dislike this drizzling rain I dare say. I rather like it, for it reminds me of grouse-shooting in the Highlands. I was even going to ask you to take a little walk round Eccleston Square before you go back to your schoolroom."

"I couldn't think of such a thing," I answered, sharply, feeling that the proposal was an impertinence.

"Couldn't you? Then it wasn't right in me to propose it, I suppose," he replied, placidly. "And yet I should be so glad of half an hour's quiet talk with you. It's very nice telling the children fairy stories, but rather a hindrance to conversation. Well, we'll postpone the walk round the square till we've pleasanter weather and you know me better. Do you know I have been thinking of you so much in the last few days."

Had he? There must be something sympathetic in our thoughts then, for he has never been out of mine.

We had turned into Lowther Street by this time, and I was weak enough to be glad that it is such a long street. I would not have gone three yards out of my way with him if the happiness of my life had depended on it, but there was no harm in letting him walk as far as Mrs. Hazleton's door with me.

"Yes, I have been thinking about you a good deal, Miss Faunthorpe," he said, after a pause. "I have been thinking what might have happened if I had been a rich man and free to follow my own inclination."

This was telling me plainly that he was neither rich nor free.

"Can you guess what I fancied would have happened in that case?"

"No, indeed."

"I thought it just possible that I might have been tempted to ask you to be my wife."

He waited for my reply, but I was dumb. I felt choking, and could not find a word to answer him.

"What would you have said in that case?"

Some diabolical counsellor suggested a flippant answer instead of a serious one.

"Isn't your question rather like Lord Dundreary's?" I asked. "If you had had a brother, do you think he would have liked cheese?"

"I see," he said, with a disappointed tone, "I am not to expect a serious answer to a hypothetical question. I dare say you are right, Miss Faunthorpe. In all life's delicate questions women are always wiser than men."

I thought that he had taken the easiest way of telling me that his circumstances forbade him to think of marrying me.

"In that case," I said to myself, "he has no right to waylay me as I come from the post;" and I tried to feel very angry with him.

"So you didn't go home to spend your Christmas holidays?" he said presently.

"Home! Do you suppose I could afford to travel to Yorkshire and back for a week's pleasure? Besides, I have no real home. My sisters and I are dependent on my uncle's bounty, and he is only a parish doctor, who finds it a hard thing to pay his butcher and baker."

I was determined to let him know how poor I am, and how wise he has been in coming to the conclusion that I am no wife for him.

"Poor little thing," he said compassionately, and his pity did me good somehow. It did not gall, as most people's pity does.

"Poor little girl," he said again, after a few moments' silence. 'An orphan, and sent out into the world to bear the burden of ervitude and all ill-usage 'that patient merit from the unworthy akes.' One would suppose that you could hardly be worse off han you are at present."

This was not very cheering, but I said nothing. We were near Mrs. Hazleton's door by this time and yet we had been walking slowly.

"Any change would be for the better, one would think," he said, musingly. "A change that would give this poor little waif a sworn protector and defender,—a husband pledged to toil or her and cherish her. But a poor husband—a man at war with fortune—bah! I'll tell you what it is, Miss Faunthorpe," e burst out suddenly, "with your lovely face you ought to make a brilliant marriage."

"So I was told when I was sixteen," said I, "but I'm almost wenty, and the fairy prince in the shape of a rich husband hasn't appeared yet."

"You wouldn't despise an eligible opportunity of exchanging Mrs. Hazleton's schoolroom for a house in Kensington Palace Gardens, I suppose? You have a feminine inclination for fine lothes, servants with powdered heads, carriages and horses, and box at the opera?"

"I am human, and I don't pretend to be superior to the weakesses of humanity," I answered, feeling that I was making myself intensely disagreeable.

He provoked me, somehow, by his nonchalant manner of discussing my position and prospects. Luckily, we were quite t the door now, and I was able to beat a retreat before anything till more unpleasant had been said upon either side.

"Good afternoon, Captain Secretan," I said.

"It must be good-bye," he answered, "I am going into Norfolk to-morrow for a month's shooting."

I felt as if he had said that he was going to Australia, but I nly answered "Oh, in that case, good-bye;" and so we shook hands again, and then he lifted his hat and went away, while I gave the bell a good sharp pull that insured its being answered promptly.

I don't quite know whether I like him or hate him; but whichever feeling it is, it must be rather strong of its kind, as I cannot get him out of my thoughts. I am inclined to think that it is hatred. What could be more disagreeable or humiliating than his way of speaking about me before my face, as if I had been miles away? "Poor thing, poor little waif!"

I grow hot and red when I think of it.

Jan. 14.—The year is just a fortnight old. There has been snow, but bright, clear weather, a blue sky, and sunshine. We walk in Kensington Gardens every day, and meet him every day. He makes the three girls run races with their hoops, he being umpire, and during the race he and I are able to talk without restraint. He only stopped four days in Norfolk. He told me that the shooting was very good, but that he was bored to death after the second day, and yet it was in a pleasant country house that he was staying at, according to his own account. There was to be a ball the very day after he came away, but he did not care to stay for it. Curious man!

My black silk dress has come, and is a great success. I dread to see the dressmaker's bill, as I have only reserved a sovereign for the making, and I am afraid she will charge me something nearer three. The dress certainly fits to perfection, and is beautifully finished; the trimmings simple, but of the best quality. At home, Marion and I used to make our own dresses, but after going nearly out of my mind for a week over piping-cord and button-holes, I always felt myself a dowdy at the last.

Mrs. Hazleton has a dinner party to-morrow, Captain Secretan is coming in the evening, and I shall wear my new dress. Have I made up my mind yet whether I like him or hate him?

Yes. I do neither. I love him—love him—love him.

There, it is written at last. Foolish old diary, how I shall despise you and myself some day when I read over this wretched page!

Jan. 16.—Such a delicious party last night! Captain Secretan was the first person I saw when I slipped quietly in at the back drawing-room door. He was watching the door, and those dark eyes brightened at sight of me. I sang to him, I played to him, I talked to him, the party was all him. The rest of the people were only the medium through which I saw him,—or they were like trees in a landscape, and he the living figure in the foreground. I know he likes to talk to me, and to hear me sing or play; but I wonder whether he loves *me*.

Feb. 3.—It has come at last. He has asked me plainly, straightforwardly, anxiously, earnestly, to be his wife.

He has told me that he is poor, that he is living just now on the money he got for his commission. He has nothing else, but he has youth, health, and strength, some talents, and he is willing to work. With a wife whom he fondly loved he would have a motive for beginning a new career.

"I'm such a happy-go-lucky fellow," he said, in his bright, cheery way, "that I can hardly bring myself to put my shoulder to the wheel for my own sake, but if I had you to work for, pet, I should slave like a Goliath."

I don't like to remind him that the Philistine soldier was more remarkable for strength than industry.

He made me say yes, and promise whatever he liked. How could I resist him, when I love him so dearly that the lightest touch of his hand makes me tremble? and there seems to be more pathos in his voice than in the tenderest phrase of Mozart's. He is so straightforward, so candid, so noble. He wanted to take Mrs. Hazleton into his confidence immediately, so that I might be married very quietly from her house.

"We have nothing to wait for, darling," he said, "unless we were to wait till I have made a fortune, which would mean at least half a dozen years of severance,—just the brightest, happiest, years of life sacrificed to a sordid scruple, an unworthy doubt of Providence. If you love me, Sibyl, you will not talk of waiting."

"I should like to be wise and prudent," I told him, "but your impetuosity carries me along like a torrent."

"Love is a torrent," answered he, "do not oppose so poor a thing as reason against its sacred might."

I entreated him to say nothing to Mrs. Hazleton. An idea had occurred to me which made me hesitate, even with my lover's hand clasping mine, as to the wisdom of yielding to his prayer.

I remembered a strange fact, which had almost slipped out of my mind lately. I remembered that Alexis Secretan is the natural inheritor of his father's hatred, the natural enemy of my rich uncle, Stephen Trenchard, the uncle from whom I have been taught to expect a fortune. If I marry Captain Secretan, I surrender all hope of favour from my uncle.

I begged Alex—he has taught me to call him Alex—to say nothing to Mrs. Hazleton yet awhile. I wanted time to think.

After all, this hope of fortune from my uncle Stephen may be only a dream, vain as that idea of a rich husband with which I used to delude myself when I was a school girl. On the other hand, I have the knowledge from my poor mother that my uncle was a very rich man twenty years ago (I have the knowledge from his last letter to my uncle Robert, enclosing a twenty-pound bank bill as a present for Marion and me); that he has never married, and has no intention of marrying; that he looks forward to returning to his native country in a few years and making the acquaintance of his nieces. Too good a chance in all this, surely, to be thrown away. It would be rather a bitter thing for me to see Marion chosen for her uncle's heiress, while I was left a pauper.

What am I to do? How am I to choose between Alexis and the possibility of a large fortune?

Prudence suggests that I should only pledge myself to Alexis on condition that our marriage shall be deferred for some years.

We are both young. We can afford to wait a few years, and yet have a good deal of the brightness of life before us. My uncle Stephen is an old man, older no doubt at his age than men who have spent their lives in Europe. Whether I am to inherit any portion of his wealth is a question that must be decided in a few years. I must tell Alex that he must wait. If his love is real and earnest it cannot be lessened by time.

Feb. 5. I have told him my decision. Vain, hopeless, to talk of reason with a man whose inclination is his only law. He tells me that if I really cared for him I could not propose dreary years of separation. My statement that I have rich relatives who may leave me money if I marry to please them, and are sure to leave me nothing if I marry without their consent, fell on ears obstinately deaf to reason. Love like this is worse than a torrent —it is a maelstrom. Prudence, reason, worldly wisdom, are mere straws in the whirlpool. I must see him no more.

Feb. 7. I have seen him again. Poor Alex! He looks so unhappy. How sweet to know that I have such power over him! I, to whom he seemed such a far-off creature two months ago. Is the chance of fortune worth such a love as his?

Feb. 8. Stephen Trenchard may live to be as old as Old Parr, and leave his money to the Asylum for Idiots, after I have sacrificed youth and love and all that is sweetest in life to the sordid hope of fortune.

Feb. 9. A hopelessly wet day. I have seen him walk up and down the street three times in the rain. I know his dear umbrella.

Feb. 11. In the Broad Walk again yesterday. It is all settled. I am to give Mrs. Hazleton a month's notice to-morrow—our agreement is a month's notice on either side—in the event of my proving inefficient, she said. Not in the event of my not liking the situation. Oh dear no, of course not.

I am so agitated that I can hardly write. This day month I am to have my boxes packed, and go quietly away in a cab at ten o'clock in the morning, drive to the station and deposit my luggage, and then meet Alexis, with whom I shall drive back to the quietest little church in Ecclestonia, where we are to be married. No witnesses but the pew-opener and the clerk; no announcement in the *Times*. The secret of our marriage kept from everybody who knows us, at the outset, at any rate, so that if Stephen Trenchard dies in India—a likely thing after all—I may still inherit my share of his fortune. Dear old uncle Robert is such an easy-going man, that as long as I tell him I am comfortably situated with my employer he will never put himself out of the way to know more. He has not an acquaintance in London whom he could ask to call upon me at Mrs. Hazleton's. There is no such isolation as poverty.

I have arranged with Jane Dimond, the under housemaid, about my letters. She will receive any that come to Lowther Street for me, and post any that I send her to be posted. I have given her quite a heap of things, the weeding out of my wardrobe, and made her my friend for life.

March 11. To-morrow is to be my wedding day. Oh, fearful day! on which hangs all my life to come. Will the future be blessed or accursed for to-morrow's vows?

I wish Marion and uncle Robert could have been with me. It would all have seemed more real. I remember my foolish fancies—my castles in the air. The grand wedding at which I used to see myself figuring as chief performer; my white satin dress and Brussels flounces; the carriages; the favours; the crowd; Mendelssohn's Wedding March; the joyous peal of bells. Those bells are sounding in my ears to-night.

To-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow! Before noon to-morrow I shall have ceased to be Sibyl Faunthorpe. My name will be Sibyl Secretan—name of all others most abhorrent to my uncle, Stephen Trenchard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ELITE OF REDCASTLE.

REDCASTLE is a country town. It is not a manufacturing town, or a seaport, or a garrison town, or a settlement in any manner designed to be of wide and general use to society. It exists for itself alone, and is exclusive to a fault. It is on the high road to nowhere. Erase it from the map of England to-morrow, and nobody but its own inhabitants would be the worse off for its evanishment. It produces nothing but elderly people with limited incomes, and scandal. For the cultivation of this last article Redcastle is like a mushroom bed in a cellar, a dark corner of the land in which fungi abound and flourish.

It is not a bad town in which to enjoy a brief span of repose from the turmoil and bustle of the industrial and commercial world;—the world of labour and pleasure, profit, loss, and pain. Not a bad old town in which to dream away a joyless, painless old age. But to live in Redcastle, to bound one's hopes within its brick and mortar confines, to regulate one's life by its petty proprieties and narrow creed! Heaven pity that wretch to whom destiny flings the lot of life-long bondage in Redcastle.

It is a clean old town. Scarcely in laborious Holland, where the servant maids scrub the chimney-pots and pipe-clay the gutters, would you find a cleaner. A rainy day, which makes mud and slush in busier places, only washes down and renovates Redcastle. The one wide street, with its massive old brick houses, square, and strong, and substantial—the historic gateway, which divides the one street into two, Below Bar and Above Bar—and the fine old Coach and Horses Inn, where seldom coaches or horses are seen to stop, the inn which, save for the mildest indulgence in billiards, and brandy and soda among the youth of the town, seems to exist rather as a part and parcel of Redcastle, an institution essential to the honour and glory of the town, than for any commercial purpose, since it appears morally impossible that the establishment can be self-supporting,—all these are the pink of cleanliness. The pretty little minster, more architecturally perfect than many a grander fane, looks as if it were kept under a glass shade. The market-place presents on off days a broad expanse of spotless pavement blinking and smiling up at the sun. The turnpike road on which Redcastle lies is one of the best in Yorkshire; the narrow lanes and by-streets leading up to that broad stretch of common land known as Redcastle Woods, apparently for the sole reason that it is barren of anything taller than a hazel-bush, are innocent of mud or smoke. The scanty suburbs of the town present a sprinkling of smallish houses, for the most part uninteresting of aspect, but all scrupulously clean. Those modern edifices, the Wesleyan Chapel, the Independent Chapel, and that masonic temple the Athena Lodge, are of whitest freestone, with shining windows, and hearthstoned steps embellishing their classic porticoes.

Redcastle, producing nothing, and offering no attraction to visitors, is naturally not a wealthy settlement. The rich inhabitants of Redcastle can be counted on the fingers of a single hand. Yet there is perhaps no town in England in which respect for wealth is more deeply implanted in the human mind. It is a aying of the profane that twopence halfpenny will not consort vith twopence in Redcastle, but this is not a true saying, for more han it worships wealth does Redcastle worship appearances, and f A, with twopence, can put on the semblance of threepence, he hall be assuredly held highter than C, who lacks the art to obtain s much out of twopence halfpenny.

The *élite* of Redcastle—that is to say, persons of fixed income r established professional earning, ranging from eight to eighteen undred per annum, live within a narrow circle. The houses immediately below Bar, and the houses immediately above Bar, helter the aristocracy of the town. Below Bar, grave old redrick houses of the early Georgian period, roomy, and comfortable vithin, respectable of aspect without; above Bar, houses of a nore modern date, stone façades, French windows, porches, verandahs, larger gardens, and ostentatious stabling, rarely used ave for the accommodation of a pony chaise, like one of Falstaff's uck baskets.

Within this charmed circle, in the largest of the stone-fronted ouses above Bar, resides Colonel Stormont, who enjoys the privileges of retirement and half-pay, cheered by the society of his vife and family, the family consisting of a grown-up son and wo grown-up daughters who, of various views upon other questions, are at one in the opinion that Redcastle was called into eing for their especial behoof, and who regulate their conduct by hat idea.

Colonel and Mrs. Stormont take the lead in Redcastle society. Their names are at the head of the croquet and archery club, which black-balls every one who is suspected of having once had a cousin connected with trade. They are chief patrons of the assize and masonic balls. They sanctify the more chaste and classic of the Redcastle concerts with their august presence, or, at least, Mrs. Stormont allows her name to grace the list of patronesses, and add a lustre to the programme of the evening's harmony. If St. Cecilia had come to life again she could hardly have been in more request among the concert-givers than Mrs. Stormont, who scarcely knows Mozart from Offenbach, or Beethoven from Brinley Richards.

To offend Colonel and Mrs. Stormont would be to be at war with Redcastle; and it is doubtful if any one so unfortunately placed could continue to reside in the town. He would be obliged to depart, exiled by that awful ban; like Ovid from Rome, or Dante from Florence.

In the large stucco-fronted house with the Norman turret resides Mr. Marlin Spyke, the great shipbuilder of Krampston-on-Tybur. Mr. and Mrs. Spyke live with some splendour, but a self-contained kind of life, not conducive to wide popularity. They receive very little company, their names grace the subscription list of no local charity, they patronize no local entertainment, they attend no masonic or benevolent hall. They are negatively great, and will be remembered when they are dead for the many noble deeds they have not done.

After the Stormonts and the Marlin Spykes come the professional classes below Bar; Mr. Jewson, the chief local solicitor and vestry clerk; Dr. Mitsand, an elderly man of some distinction, being one of the army surgeons who endured and ameliorated the miseries of the Crimean war; Mr. Groshen, the banker; Mr. Farrer, the curate; and a few others, whom it is needless to particularize. On the outskirts of the town reside three or four gentlemen who derive their income from houses or lands, are more rustic in their bearing and attire than the inhabitants of the citadel, and in a general way give themselves airs, as affecting to belong to the county families. Afar off in their various fastnesses, isolated, inaccessible, unapproachable, live the county families. A few of them are on visiting terms with the Stormonts, Dr. Mitsand, and the clergy of Redcastle; but they regard the town otherwise as a depôt for groceries and draperies, and a centre of Radicalism for the lower classes. Their big family landaus with tall, slab-sided horses and brass harness, pervade the street on fine afternoons; their sons trot briskly through the quiet town on hunting mornings in well-worn pink. They turn out occasionally for a concert, and take care to testify by loud talk and laughter among themselves, and a supercilious contemplation of the rest of the audience through eye-glasses, that they hold themselves as creatures apart from the townspeople.

Within ten miles of Redcastle is that thriving seaport, Krampston-on-Tybur, famous for shipbuilding, ropemaking, linseed crushing, sugar baking, and general exportation and importation. Krampston has noisy, bustling streets, miles of quays, labyrinths of docks, drawbridges that arrest the pedestrian at every turn, so intersected is the land by narrow inlets of water. Krampston has very little "society," in the Redcastle sense of that word, but it has commercial activity, the vigorously throbbing pulse of active and useful life, name, and place and power in the world. The word "Krampston" branded on bale or packing-case is familiar in Buenos Ayres or Sierra Leone, in Pernambuco or Timbuctoo, while the name of Redcastle is hardly known out of the post office or British Gazetteer.

Among the *élite* of Redcastle—the archons—the equestrian order—Robert Faunthorpe, surgeon and parish doctor, has no place. The *élite* give him good-day when they meet him trudging toilfully above or below Bar, or trotting meekly along one of the lanes on his unkempt pony. Good, easy-going little man, ever ready to help the helpless to whom he ministers, often queezing a shilling or a sixpence out of his ill-furnished purse where he feels that drugs alone are of no avail. Kindly gentleman though he is, the *élite* of Redcastle cannot recognise him as member of their order. He lives in a shabby red house at the ag-end of the town, grooms his pony, digs in the garden, keeps ne old woman-servant of eccentric aspect; he takes snuff inrdinately—perhaps it is his only consolation—and the normal habbiness of his clothes is enhanced by the process. His xistence is altogether unorthodox. He is beyond the pale.

True that he has reared three orphan nieces, the children of a rother who died penniless ten years ago; and it is hardly to be upposed that this act of benevolence has not cost him as much s the maintainance of a groom and gardener. But Redcastle annot recognise these small charities. They judge a man as hey judge his house, by the front which he presents to the orld. They would recognise the groom and gardener as elements f social status. They smile gently at the idea of the three rphan nieces as a harmless eccentricity of that eccentric little nan, Dr. Faunthorpe.

Happily Robert Faunthorpe, M.R.C.S., and Dr. by courtesy, is f all men the last to regret that social heaven to which he has ever ascended. He sees Colonel and Mrs. Stormont, Dr. Mitsand, nd Mr. and Mrs. Groshen revolving in their orbits as he sees the lanets, and envies them no more. The idea that they do him ny unkindness by not inviting him to their dinner parties, by ot extending the hand of friendship to his fatherless nieces, ever enters his mind. He is so simple-minded a little man that e is content to go his way and let other people go theirs.

An eccentric, evidently, as Redcastle opines.

CHAPTER VII.

DRIFTING INTO HAVEN.

T is a soft, calm evening, early in April, and Dr. Faunthorpe's habby old house is as much brightened by the westering sunight as it can be brightened by anything less than the three oats of paint for which its worm-eaten woodwork has been anguishing for the last twenty years. There has not been a fivepound note expended upon the repair or the beautification of Robert Faunthorpe's house within the memory of the oldest nhabitant of Redcastle. It is scrupulously clean, and that is he best that can be said of it. There is a small garden in front, where flourish those homely perennials which demand little care and no artificial nutriment,—lupins, Canterbury bells, flags, London pride, polyanthuses, primroses, and wall-flowers. Behind the house there is a long strip of ground where the surgeon cultivates cabbages and potatoes, leeks and potherbs, leaving only two narrow borders for floriculture. Happily there are ancient rose bushes in these neglected borders,—rose bushes from which Beauty's father might have gathered those large red cup-shaped cabbage roses that grow in a child's picture book. The borders are edged with box, tall and thick,—box that has been growing for a century. The low red walls, crumbling into hollows where the birds have pecked at the brickwork, crowned with dragon's-mouth, stonecrop, and houseleek, would be delicious in a picture, and are not unlovely in reality. At the bottom of this long narrow garden there is a patch of ground set ap rt for thebenefit of Scrub, the pony, upon which grow purple-flowered tares, three crops in a twelvemonth sometimes.

Within, the house has a certain air of homely comfort. The shabby old furniture has that well-worn look which in some wise endears goods and chattels to their owners. Beeswax and labour have done their best to brighten and beautify the ancient mahogany bureaus, the clumsy walnutwood bedsteads and tables,—made at a time when walnutwood was almost as cheap as deal. Cracked old jars and bottles of common blue delf adorn the tall narrow wooden mantelpieces; curtains of watered moreen, once crimson, but faded to a tawny brown, drape the deeply recessed windows of parlour and surgery. The rooms are spacious, but low; the ceilings sustained by massive beams painted black. The walls are for the most part paneled, and the paneling has been painted a dingy pink or a dirty drab. To keep this paneling spotless is the old servant's anxious care, and much house-flannel and soft soap are expended thereupon to Dr. Faunthorpe's aggravation,—that good easy man having no passion for cleanliness in the abstract.

A wide stone passage leads from the front door to the half-glass door opening into the back garden, thus letting light and air through the old house. A clumsy mahogany-framed barometer, a row of hat-pegs, and a faded map of England are the only furniture of this passage, or hall, as a modern house-agent would call it. A roomy, solid old staircase, with shallow treads, and ponderous balusters, leads to the upper chambers, which are numerous and of fair size. To the right of the front door is the parlour, on the left the surgery. Behind the surgery is the best parlour; behind the every-day parlour is the large stone-paved kitchen.

For this house, with its acre of garden, Dr. Faunthorpe pays twenty pounds a year; so there is some saving of house-rent in residence at Redcastle, if your soul aspires not after any higher state than comfortable vegetation, and you are content to inhabit the inferior end of the town.

Dr. Faunthorpe paces his front garden on this calm April evening, smoking his pipe. He is a smoker as well as a snuffer, and finds solace in tobacco after his daily round. This is his hour of rest and leisure. True that it may be broken in upon at any moment by some sudden call for his services, but his regular daily labour, his measured grind at life's mill, is over.

He prefers the small front garden for his evening pipe to the larger ground at the back,—first, because he is to the fore if wanted; and secondly, because, his house being on the high road, it is just possible that something may go by, vehicle or passenger, to the enlivenment of his leisure.

He is meditative and silent, but not alone. His niece Marion, a tall girl with wavy light hair, and a pre-Raphaelite figure, stands in a listless attitude by the gate. His niece Jenny, an overgrown girl of twelve, with a very short frock and stalwart egs, encased in brown worsted stockings, is watering the flowers, and making as much mess as it is possible to make in the operation.

"Just look what puddles you are making in the path, stupid," exclaims the elder sister, peevishly regarding the efforts of her junior. "I do wish you'd leave things alone. You're always up to some mischief or other."

"I suppose I shouldn't be mischievous if I let the primroses die for want of water," remonstrates the junior, in no wise abashed. "That's what you'd do, with your laziness and fine-lady ways. You were bad enough before you went to stay with uncle Stephen, but you're ever so much worse now. I'm sure I wish he'd kept you there instead of sending you back, like a bad penny. Uncle Robert and I were as jolly as sandboys while you were away."

The young person sets down her water-pot and delivers this diatribe with arms akimbo, like Madame Angot's daughter. Marion shudders.

"Sandboys! What an expression for a young lady!" she ejaculates.

"Pray where's the harm in sandboys?" demands the incorrigible Jenny. "They're more respectable than you, as far as I can see, for they get their own living."

"My dear," remonstrates uncle Robert mildly, "that is not the way to address your elder sister."

"Why does she come and loaf about here, then, with her stuckupishness? Why doesn't she go and be a governess like Sibyl? If she heard what Hester says of her she'd be ashamed of herself."

"My love, you have no right to quote Hester."

"Hester is an impertinent, mischief-making creature," exclaims Marion.

"And as to your sister going out as a governess, my dear," continues uncle Robert mildly, "with her expectations it would be about the most foolish thing she could do."

"Expectations,—dead men's shoes!" exclaims the terrible child, twirling the watering-can so that its last drops sprinkle Marion's pretty blue dress. "I should hate myself if *I* was mean enough to calculate upon what any one would leave me."

"Quite right of you," says Marion, with a supercilious laugh—that sneering school-girl laugh, which we all remember to have been crushed by occasionally in our youth,—"for certainly no one is likely to leave *you* money."

"I dare say not, with you in the way," answers the irrepressible Jenny. "They'd feel they were doing an act of charity bestowing their fortune on you, for it would be the same as leaving it to the Asylum for Idiots. One simpleton provided for, at any rate."

With this the imp swings round upon her heels as on a pivot, brandishes the watering-pot as an Indian savage his club, and gallops into the house. Jane Faunthorpe never walks. She has the action of an unbroken colt, and seems, when in motion, to have as many legs as that animal. When she comes downstairs there is a sound as of a sack of coals flung from the upper story. How the old house sustains itself under her youthful vigour is a mystery to the parish doctor.

"I'd run after her and give her a good box on the ears," says Marion, viciously, "if I didn't want to see the omnibus go by."

The omnibus is a stunted covered vehicle, like a carrier's cart, garnished with glazed windows, which plies between the station and the outskirts of Redcastle, and it is nearly time for this conveyance to pass with its evening freight. There are sometimes as many as five people arrive by the six o'clock train from Krampston,—nay, the Krampston train sometimes brings that rare bird, a passenger from London.

"It's a pity you ever sent that child to a day school, uncle Robert," Marion remarks presently, wiping the waterspots daintily from her dress. "She was bad enough before, but now she is simply intolerable."

"My love, I couldn't afford a boarding school, and I was obliged to send her somewhere," replies the surgeon, in his long-suffering way. "At home she was learning only to dig potatoes and to whistle, neither of which pursuits is an attractive accomplishment in a young lady. The child is not bad at bottom."

"Perhaps not," answers Marion, snappishly, "but the bottom must be a long way down. I've never come to it yet."

"She is very warm-hearted."

"Yes, if warmth of heart consists in rushing at one like an avalanche, hugging one round the neck like a bear, and rumpling one's collar atrociously, without the faintest provocation."

"She is not of an idle disposition," remonstrates the uncle. "I found her cleaning the back kitchen windows at half-past six this morning. No one had asked her to do it."

"Of course not. That's just the reason she did it."

"If you would take a little more pains with her, Marion," suggests Dr. Faunthorpe, timidly——

"Pains! I might take *agonies*, and without the least effect. Didn't I begin to teach her music——"

"Yes, my dear, but you didn't go on."

"Well, you just try to teach her anything, uncle Robert—just try—that's all," says Marion, with awful significance, and then breaks out with a sigh, "Oh dear, is this precious old omnibus never coming?"

"It is rather late, my dear. But as it isn't going to bring us any one we care about, we needn't worry ourselves about it."

"It would be something to look at just for a minute. If you only knew what a difference there is between the look-out down here and above Bar. There there's almost always something going by—Mrs. Stormont's basket carriage, or Master Groshen's pony, or the butcher's cart."

"Ah, my dear, I'm afraid that long visit to your uncle Trenchard has spoiled you for my quiet home."

"No, it hasn't, uncle," answers the girl, with a little gush of feeling in the midst of her petulance, just strong enough to show the better side of her nature—"no, it hasn't, for this is home and that isn't. I should always feel that if I spent the rest of my life with uncle Stephen. Of all the old fidgets——! Well, I suppose I oughtn't to say anything against him, for he has been very kind to me in his way. He has given me a good deal of money from first to last, though I must say he doled it out stingily, as if he liked the money better than me; and it is nice staying at his house—one feels one's self somebody. Only think of the Stormonts, and the Groshens and the Marlin Spykes calling on him before he had been three weeks in Redcastle, while you've lived here thirty years and they've never called upon you."

"People at this end of the town are not visited, my dear," replies the doctor, mildly, as one who bows to the mysterious ways of Providence and questions not. "I dare say the *élite* of Redcastle called upon your uncle out of kindness, he being a stranger."

"He being a millionaire, uncle, that's what you mean. Very much they'd have called upon him if he'd been a stranger who wanted to get his living. Think of the Stormonts giving a dinner party on purpose for him, and inviting *me*—after ignoring me for the last four years—staring me in the face, after church, for two hundred Sundays, and taking no more interest in me than if I were a stone cherub on a tablet in the minster, and now, all of a sudden, being so fond of me. It's too ridiculous. If I was as worldly as they are, I'd take a little more pains not to show it."

"The world is worldly, my love," replies uncle Robert, with his resigned air. "You can hardly expect it to be otherwise. For my part, I am very glad to think that the Stormonts have taken notice of you, and that you've been invited out with Mr. Trenchard. It may lead to your making a good marriage, though you needn't set your mind upon that now, as it is tolerably certain your uncle will leave you an independence. I only wish Sibyl were at home to have her share of good fortune."

"It's her own fault if she isn't," says Marion.

"Say rather her conscientiousness, my dear. She doesn't like to leave Mrs. Hazleton in a difficulty about her children; and very right too. But I hope Mrs. Hazleton will suit herself with a new governess very soon, and let Sibyl come home. Mr. Trenchard has asked for her so often, and it really seems flying in the face of Providence for her to be out of the way."

"If she wasn't a stupid, she wouldn't be at Mrs. Hazleton's beck and call," says Marion, and then exclaims, shrilly, "Here's the omnibus, and lots of people inside. Why, there's some one nodding to us—a lady in a gray hat—and—I declare, the 'bus is stopping. Why, it's Sibyl."

The blundering vehicle stops before Dr. Faunthorpe's gate; a shabby carpet bag—only a carpet bag—is handed down from the roof, and in the next instant Sibyl is in the homely little garden, sobbing hysterically on her uncle's shoulder.

He presses her to his breast tenderly, and looks in the pale, wan face.

"Why, my darling, how ill you look—how changed—how thin!"

"I've had so much hard work, uncle," she answers faintly, "but, thank God, I am at home at last."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

"HOME at last," cries the wanderer, with glad thankfulness.

This is a night of rejoicing in Dr. Faunthorpe's modest dwelling. The prodigal daughter has returned, and the fatted calf, or at least so much of him as a cutlet, fried as only Hester can fry a veal cutlet, is served up in her honour. How cheery and homely the common parlour, with its shabby old furniture, dimly illuminated by two composite candles which leave the panelled corners in densest shadow, seems to those tired eyes!

"It is so nice to be at home again, uncle," says Sibyl lovingly, as she draws her chair a little nearer the doctor's at supper-time. "What an old dear Hester is! and how deliciously she cooks!"

"If you're so fond of home, I wonder you stayed away so long," remarks Marion, who cannot help being occasionally disagreeable in her petty way. There was nothing large-minded about Marion, Sibyl used to complain. She would never commit a big sin, but would forfeit heaven by a multitude of infinitesimal faults.

"Marion's faults are like the animalculæ in a glass of water," remarked Sibyl on another occasion, "too minute to be seen without a microscope, but making the water unwholesome all the same."

"I had to stop away to suit other people's convenience," replies the prodigal, looking downward as she squeezes lemon juice upon her cutlet.

"How altered you must be!" says that odious Marion. "Other people's convenience used to be the last thing you thought about. When is your luggage coming?"

"My luggage? I brought it with me."

"I mean the rest of your luggage. The omnibus man brought in nothing but a carpet bag."

"That is my luggage," answers Sibyl, colouring to the roots of her hair. It is the first tinge of red that has warmed her delicate cheek since her arrival. "I gave one of Mrs. Hazleton's servants that horrid old heavy trunk of mine."

"But your dresses, your linen, you can't get them all into that carpet bag," cries Marion, almost in a shriek. To be without a variety of clothes is the last calamity she can conceive among the miseries of humanity.

"I have not one dress besides this. You can't have any notion how one's dresses wear out in a schoolroom—mischievous romping girls pulling one about all day long, ink spilt in every direction, candle-grease on all the tables, cups of tea perpetually turned over. I was determined to buy nothing during the last quarter, so I wore my old dresses till they were almost in rags, and gave them to my favourite housemaid when I came away."

"I dare say it was an excellent plan," says Marion, shrugging her thin shoulders, "but you won't be in a condition to make a very good appearance in Redcastle till you've new things. People will expect you to bring down the London fashions too. They come out on the first of March, don't they?"

"What a pity Fate made you a gentleman's daughter, Marion," remarks Sibyl, with a cold sneer. "You would have made such a capital milliner. Your soul would have been in your work."

Dr. Faunthorpe sits back in his chair, reposeful, after that little bit of hot supper, which is not an every day luxury. The small snappings and snarlings of his nieces hardly discompose him, he is so used to their sisterly talk. He is glad to have his handsome niece at home again, seated close to his chair, with all those familiar winning ways which have won her the first place in his heart; small gushings of loving speech, tender little smiles, gentle touches of a white fluttering hand—graces of manner which may mean very little, but are very sweet; petty Circean arts which have beguiled honest men to ruin and death before to-day.

"My darling," he says presently, as the dark brown eyes smile upon him, brightening in the candlelight, "I am so glad you've come back. It wasn't wise to stay away so long at the risk of vexing your uncle Trenchard: but I'll say no more about that. You are here, and all is well. You must go and see him to-morrow.

"How can she," exclaims Marion, "in that gown?" pointing contemptuously to Sibyl's shabby alpaca, an alpaca which has seen much service, cockled by the rain, and frayed at the edges of the cuffs, and with that shrunken and dwindled appearance that ill-used garments are apt to assume.

"Pshaw, what does her gown matter? You can lend her a gown. You have gowns enough and to spare."

"None that will fit Sibyl," replies Marion, who prides herself on her superior height. "She's welcome to wear one, but it 'll be two inches on the ground."

"Can't she run a tuck, or cut a bit off?" argues uncle Robert.

"I shall have to give you a tonic, my love," he adds, contemplating his elder niece anxiously, "you are looking so fagged and worn."

"I am at home with you, uncle Robert; that is the best tonic for me," replies the girl fondly.

She is fond of him to-night. This shabby old home, which she abandoned in sheer discontent two years ago, seems very dear to her just now. It is a haven for a storm-beaten soul.

"You will have a better home than this, my pet, I hope, for the greater part of your time," answers the doctor cheerily. "I've no doubt your uncle Trenchard will ask you to stay with him as he did Marion. She was quite three months at Lancaster Lodge, and is to go back again by and by. I look upon her as little more than a visitor here; but she is kind enough to make the best of her old uncle Robert's humdrum house."

"It is a great relief to be here for a change, uncle," answers Marion. "I felt a fine lady at uncle Trenchard's, but I feel my own mistress here. If it wasn't for that tyrannical old Hester, your house would be liberty hall; and I can forgive even Hester when she is in a good humour and makes hot cakes for breakfast."

An hour later and uncle Robert has smoked his after-supper pipe, and the girls are in their bedroom, the old room which Sibyl knows so well, with its ridiculous flowered paper, low ceiling, and high painted dado, and curious brass safety bolts upon the door, as if burglars were a contingency to be provided against in that humble dwelling. How well she remembers the long narrow chimney-piece, the basket-shaped grate with its wide hobs, the open-work brass fender, the painted four-post bedstead, drab and green, with skimpy dimity valance, and two starveling curtains. The rickety deal dressing-table, the streaky looking-glass, which used to reflect a fair girl's face wondering at its own beauty. The tall mahogany wardrobe that never was opened without threatening to topple over and wreak destruction on its violator. The scanty strips of bedside carpet, dull in colour and perplexing in pattern. How often has she pored and puzzled over those interwoven scrolls, in sheer idleness of thought. All things are unchanged. There are the wretched old ornaments on the mantelpiece. The pasteboard spill-boxes, adorned with faded gold paper, ancient works of art by fingers that have long been dust. The little black Wedgwood vases, urn-shaped, funereal. The hand screens with lithographs of Dr. Syntax pasted thereupon, and more paper gilding. The two black profile miniatures of dead and forgotten relatives.

It seems a dear old room somehow to Sibyl to-night, for it brings back the feelings of her innocent girlish days, when life, if it had few pleasures, had no cares. Now life means perplexity. Existence is an entanglement from which only some happy turn of fortune can extricate her.

She sits in her old place on the window-seat, and loosens the long twisted roll of rich brown hair, which falls over her bare shoulders like shining drapery.

"Goodness!" cries Marion, "how skinny your shoulders have grown!"

"Have they?" says Sibyl, coolly, glancing downwards at a white neck and arms in which the bones are too sharply defined for beauty. "Then we shall look more like sisters when we wear low dresses. Your shoulders were always skinny."

Marion is silenced for the moment, and proceeds with the destruction of that elaborate edifice of hair and hair-pads which she constructs with infinite pains every morning, even though no one outside her own small family circle is likely to be gratified by the sight thereof. Marion's hair has been washed and doctored to the fashionable pre-Raphaelite colour. It is thick and fluffy, and short, only just covering the points of her bony shoulders, and standing out round her head like an exaggerated nimbus. It is not bad hair altogether, and Marion thinks it one of her strong points, like her pre-Raphaelite figure, her long narrow foot, eighteen-inch waist, arched eyebrows, white teeth, and other small graces, some of which are the praiseworthy result of patient training.

"Do let me see your pretty things, Sibyl," the younger sister exclaims presently, twisting one of her yellow tresses in and out of a hair-pin.

The elder looks up, startled out of a profound reverie.

"What pretty things?"

"Well, you must have something to show me—presents—things you have bought out of your salary. I'm sure I should have a lot to show out of forty pounds a year for two years. Glove-boxes, sealskin purses, card-cases, neck-ties, lace, gloves, and so on. I dare say that carpet bag is bursting with them."

"It is doing nothing of the kind. I found that it was as much as I could do to dress myself decently for Mrs. Hazleton's parties and pay my laundress. Evening dresses are so unprofitable."

"They must be, if you have *nothing* to show out of eighty pounds. I never thought you could bring yourself to wear such a dress as that alpaca thing," adds Marion, pointing contemptuously to Sibyl's shabby gown hanging on a peg upon the door. "I expected to see you come home quite a woman of fashion."

"People who teach unruly children, and have to take them out walking in all weathers, have not much chance of being fashionably dressed," answers Sibyl, wearily. "Perhaps if you could contrive to put dress out of your mind for five minutes or so, Marion, we might have a little rational conversation."

"Oh, very well; of course I know what an inferior mind mine is. You used to tell me so often enough. But you were once rather fond of talking about dress, and I thought, perhaps, if you've nothing to show me you might like to see my dresses—*not* home-made. Miss Eylett has made every one, and a pretty price she has charged me."

Marion wrenches open the refractory door of the wardrobe, and displays three calico-shrouded garments, hanging in a row, like sheeted ghosts. One by one she brings forth these treasures, whisking off their covering, and displaying each to Sibyl with a dexterous twirl of her arm. A bronze brown silk; a pale gray, with elaborate ruchings of satin; a black silk, which stands on end for very richness of fabric.

"There," she exclaims, swelling with pride, "I wore the gray—new—at Colonel Stormont's."

"At Colonel Stormont's! Is the world coming to an end, or what convulsion of nature brought you and the Stormonts together?"

"I was asked to dinner with uncle Trenchard."

"And uncle Trenchard gave you the money to buy those resses, of course."

"Yes. He said, 'Well, my dear, I suppose you'll want a new own;' and then he gave a heavy sigh, and took a bank note ut of an old-fashioned red pocket-book, and then he looked at e note so long that I was afraid he was going to change his ind, and then he gave another sigh, deeper than the first, and anded me the note—a ten-pound note. I tried to kiss him the rst time, but he didn't seem to like that, for he gave me a little eevish push, and said, 'There, my dear, that 'll do.'"

"Funny old man! How many ten-pound notes has he given ou?"

"Four altogether. He always sighs just in the same way, as every note was a wrench. He's inordinately rich, of course, ut it seems to hurt him so to part with his money that I can't elp thinking of that dreadful story of Douglas Jerrold's, 'The Ian made of Money,' and fancying that uncle Trenchard is nrolling a bit of himself when he gives away a bank note."

"It's only such people who get inordinately rich," replies ibyl, plaiting her long thick hair into one massive tail for the ight. "And how did you get on with uncle Trenchard, upon e whole?"

"Oh, very well indeed. It was so nice driving about in his new arouche, with a lovely pair of chestnuts, and feeling one's self oked up to by all Redcastle; and I had a splendid bedroom and ressing-room, and we dined at half-past seven every day, with wo men waiting upon us. I used to feel afraid of them just at rst, especially the butler, who looks the image of Mr. Groshen he banker, and that took away from the grandeur; but I soon ot accustomed to them, and learned to speak to them in an off-and way, just like Mrs. Stormont."

"Marion," says Sibyl, earnestly, "do you think uncle Trenchard ntends to leave us his money?"

"Well, I should think he must leave it to us or to hospitals; and if we can manage to please him——"

"We must please him, Marion, and wind ourselves into his withered old heart somehow. It would be ridiculous, abominable, shameful, for the money to be left to hospitals when we want it so badly. It's no use to enjoy the luxuries of his house, to take a ten-pound note from him now and then. That kind of thing will only make poverty seem worse to us afterwards. We must have his fortune."

Her eyes dilate and brighten, her lips tremble faintly as she leaves off speaking, and then her face changes in a moment, and tears run down her wan cheeks.

"Gracious, Sibyl!" cries Marion, rushing at her with a bottle of eau de Cologne and a towel, and dabbing her forehead with the perfume. "I declare you're quite hysterical. Of course we must have his money—if we can get it. What has the fidgety old thing come home to England for except to make our acquaintance and leave us his fortune? He has as good as said so ever so many times."

Marion's sisterly attentions check that hysterical attack of Sibyl's, and the two girls lie down side by side affectionately, after a brief formula in the way of evening prayer.

Deep in the chill spring night Sibyl's head tosses restlessly on the pillow, and the sleeper's lips murmur sorrowfully in troubled dreams,—

"Alex, Alex—don't be so cruel, Alex. Forgive—you know—your sake—yes, yes—as much as for my own."

So pleads the sinner's vexed soul; self-excusing, self-accusing, even in dreams.

CHAPTER IX.

UNCLE TRENCHARD.

STEPHEN TRENCHARD paces his smooth gravel walk in the April sunshine, after tiffin, looking at the sparrows, and blackbirds, and thrushes disporting blithely on his velvet lawn, or hopping away into the shadow of evergreens—great masses of laurel and laurustinus, rhododendron and bay, which surround the smooth expanse of grass in a semicircular sweep.

Very perfect is the order of Mr. Trenchard's garden—not a yellow leaf on the laurels, not a daisy peeping pertly, silver-white, from the lawn, not a branch that grows awry. In the kitchen-garden yonder, far away behind the shrubbery, the fan-shaped fruit-trees look like geometrical patterns on the yellow brick walls. The apples and pears are all wired into exactest growth, and not a twig is allowed its own way. Mr. Trenchard is in his garden by six o'clock every morning, and his severe eye interrogates the smallest sprig of groundsel, and rebukes the very slugs that vie with him in early rising. Mr. Trenchard is not a master to be trifled with, and his gardeners know it. For every shilling he expends he will have twelve pennyworth of labour—nay, thirteen or fourteen pennyworth if he can get it. Woe be to the wretch who tries to put him off with eleven pence halfpenny worth of industry!

"I've had to work for my money," says Mr. Trenchard, "and I expect value for my money from other people."

He walks briskly up and down, looking to the right and left with an eye bright and quick as a bird's, a small black eye, which looks the blacker for its whitened lashes. He is of middle height, very thin, very yellow. He has sharply cut features; nose thin, pointed, and aggressive-looking; lips also thin, and of a disagreeable pallid hue; eyebrows iron-gray, thick and bushy; brow narrow; perceptive ridge strongly marked, upper head receding; hair thick, short, and iron-gray, like the eyebrows, brushed into two sharp points, like a terrier's ears.

Mr. Trenchard wears nankeen waistcoat and trousers, very loose for his lean limbs, and a glossy black frock coat, also loose, a black satin scarf with a gold pin, and high shirt collars; a double gold eye-glass dangles on his breast, a glass which he wears for show rather than use, but which intensifies the severity of his countenance when he reproves his gardeners or lectures his butler.

He is a man who has toiled early and late, until the other day, when he took it into his head to give up his counting-house to a junior partner, and come back to England and enjoy the evening of his life at his ease. He has been a man of one idea all his days, and the single object of his existence has been the accumulation of money. The process of money-making, the honour and homage which the world renders the reputed millionaire—these have been so sweet to him that the question of what he is to do with his wealth has rarely presented itself seriously to his mind.

On his sixty-ninth birthday he awoke suddenly to the consciousness that whatever personal enjoyment he meant to have out of his wealth must be obtained within the next ten, twelve, or fifteen years. Even with his vigorous constitution he could hardly hope to live beyond the age of eighty-five. Forty years in India must take something out of a man, be he never so temperate, and abstemiousness has been one of Stephen Trenchard's virtues.

So at sixty-nine he said to himself, "It is time to go back to England; let the world see what a position I have made for myself, and take all the good I can out of life."

His seventieth birthday has not yet arrived, and he has built for his soul a lordly treasure-house, or in other words he has taken upon lease, decorated, and furnished Lancaster Lodge, one of the best houses in his father's native town of Redcastle; he has hired servants, purchased carriages and horses, and begun a plain-sailing Englishman's life on a very liberal scale. The result so far has been eminently satisfactory. His house to him a kingdom is, he rules his servants, indoor and outdoor, with a rod of iron, and feels himself a potentate.

Very pleasant to him is the incense which Redcastle offers to his wealth. People whose fathers and grandfathers snubbed or ignored his father, the struggling solicitor, bow down and worship the Anglo-Indian Plutocrat. He accepts their adoration with supreme coolness, and a quiet arrogance which his admirers extol as innate aristocracy of mind.

It has pleased him to permit his niece Marion Faunthorpe to bask in the sunshine of his favour. She is not handsome enough to charm his eye, which is critical in the matter of feminine beauty, nor is she clever enough to amuse him; but she is rather a pretty thing to have about his house, and she does very well for a listener when he is in the humour to tell his prosy old stories of dead and gone Calcutta scandals. She knows how to hold her tongue when he is inclined to be silent, is solicitous for his small comforts, quiet as a mouse when he takes his after-dinner nap. She behaves gracefully at table, neither eats nor drinks too much, looks stylish when fashionably dressed, moves about the house quietly, and is not altogether deficient in tact. He is content, therefore, to tolerate her as a frequent guest, but does not appreciate her warmly enough to ask her to take up her permanent abode with him.

He has made many inquiries about Sibyl, and he has been vexed by her non-appearance. The Stormonts, the Groshens, and other notabilities have praised the absent girl's beauty, having found out all at once that a young person whose existence they never troubled themselves to acknowledge was the loveliest girl in Redcastle. "Quite the belle of the place, I assure you, Mr. Trenchard," says Mrs. Stormont.

"Indeed," remarked Stephen Trenchard. "She was invited out very much, I suppose."

"Well, no, dear Mr. Trenchard, she was too young, you know—almost a child. And then your brother-in-law is so retiring. We could never have got him out of his shell."

If there is one thing in that region of trifles outside the money market which Mr. Trenchard appreciates it is beauty in woman. Having heard his eldest niece so enthusiastically praised, he is particularly anxious to see her, ever so much the more anxious because her indifference has thwarted him.

"She must be a queer kind of girl," he tells himself, "to hang back from a rich uncle, to prefer drudging as a governess to sponging upon me. Marion is glad enough to take all she can get, and would kneel down and kiss my shoe-string if I asked her. Her feelings are transparent enough. This other one must be something out of the common."

A wonderful advantage this for Sibyl at starting; though it is an advantage she has gained accidentally.

The great lodge bell clangs out, while Mr. Trenchard paces up and down, and startles the respectable tranquillity of Above Bar with its clamour. He takes out his watch. Too early for a ceremonious visit. Mr. Trenchard walks round by the side windows of his large square mansion, and comes within view of the gate. Two ladies enter, both young and slim, both tall, but one rather shorter than the other. The taller gives a little eager cry and runs forward to him, the second advances more slowly.

"Dear uncle Stephen," cries Marion, pursing up her lips to be kissed, an operation which uncle Stephen performs with a slightly reluctant air, "Sibyl has come home quite unexpectedly," Marion is always out of breath at the beginning of a visit, a pretty gushing way which some people call charming, "and I thought I might bring her—to—see you—dear uncle John."

"Thought you might bring her. Of course you might bring her. Haven't I been asking to see her ever since Christmas? So that is Sibyl, is it?" looking at the graceful figure lingering on the sunlit grass a few yards away from him. The bright face is flushed with palest rose, the dark full eyes are looking slily at him, the dark brown hair is burnished by the sun. A fair picture of peerless youth for crabbed age to admire.

"So that is Sibyl! Yes, she is very lovely. Those sycophants haven't exaggerated. Come here, my love, come to your old uncle. Naughty child, why did you stay away so long?"

He holds out his lean old arms, he folds her to his breast, he kisses her lovingly, paternally, as he has never yet kissed Marion, despite her affectionate blandishments.

"Well, I never!" Marion exclaims inwardly, standing a little aloof, and feeling that her reign is over.

CHAPTER X.

SIBYL TAKES THE LEAD.

THE favourable impression which Sibyl makes on her uncle Stephen Trenchard is a fact too obvious for diversity of opinion.

Marion reluctantly, sullenly even, admits that truth, with many sneers and innuendoes about winning manners and hollow-heartedness.

"I have never laid myself out to please uncle Stephen as Sibyl lays herself out," murmurs the injured maiden. "I can't flatter people with my looks. I haven't Sibyl's caressing ways. I can't pretend more affection than I feel; and I must say that uncle Stephen's dry little jerky ways of speaking and looking at one are not calculated to develop affection."

Thus argues Marion in the easy atmosphere of uncle Robert's every day parlour. The girls are seated at supper with Dr. Faunthorpe trifling with morsels of bread and cheese, after having dined with Mr. Trenchard.

"I did not find him hard or dry," replies Sibyl. "He seems really kind and affectionate, and I was grateful to him for his warm welcome. I don't know what you mean by my laying myself out to please him. I remembered that he was poor mamma's only brother, and our own flesh and blood, the uncle I had heard so much about years ago, and I was naturally touched by our meeting."

"Ah," says Marion, "what an advantage it is for a woman to be able to cry when she likes! How *do* you manage it, Sib?"

"If the tears came into my eyes to-day it was because I am not very strong just now, Marion," answers Sibyl, reddening. "You are really the most horrid girl I ever met with."

"However horrid I am, I am not double-faced," replies the other promptly. "I should be ashamed to court uncle Trenchard if I were you, when I remember the things you've said about him."

"What things?"

"What a convenient memory yours is! Haven't you said that you despised him for his meanness as a young man—that he won his way in the world by double dealing, by base flattery of his patron—that all your sympathy was with the young man he supplanted, Mr. Secretan?"

At that name Sibyl flushes crimson, and then grows ashy pale.

"Ah, I see you do remember," cries Marion, triumphantly.

"Marion," exclaims the mild little surgeon, with a rare flash of anger, "I will not have your sister teased in this manner. How dare you accuse her of falsehood or hypocrisy? She has as good a right to Stephen Trenchard's favour as you have."

"Yes, and to his fortune. Let her have it all," cries Marion, tempted to go into hysterics, but thinking better of it immediately. "She is to go and stay with him, and keep house for him, directly she can get her things ready, which, considering she came home without a rag, must take some time. She is to pay him a long visit. I'm nobody now."

"My love, you have had your innings," pleads the pacific doctor.

"Oh, of course, and just as I have got to understand his ways and know how to please him I am pushed aside."

"My dear, his sense of justice will induce him to distribute his bounty fairly."

"His sense of justice did not prevent his kissing Sibyl more affectionately than he has ever kissed me."

"Mere fancy on your part, I have no doubt," says the doctor.

After this little burst of temper Marion calms down and is
lerably placable. She even discusses her sister's outfit with
me show of interest. Mr. Trenchard has given Sibyl five-and-
venty pounds. "I suppose you are pretty well provided with
ash, little one," he said, just before she wished him good-night,
an independent-minded young woman like you who goes out
nto the world to get her own living is sure to have a well-lined
urse."

Sibyl blushed, and owned that her purse had no lining at all.

"Ah, I see, sent help home to the old doctor," muttered Mr.
renchard, fortunately not loud enough for Marion to hear, or
at sharp-tongued young person would inevitably have set him
ght. "Well, well, very right, very proper."

And then the crimson pocket-book was slowly brought forth,
nd Mr. Trenchard sighed a desponding sigh as he opened it, a
gh that was like a funeral gun for his departed bank notes.
byl went back to the dingy old house at the bottom of the town
cher by five-and-twenty pounds than when she left it at mid-day.

The girls go out gaily enough next morning to Carmichael's,
e haberdashery, linendrapery, and silk mercery establishment
Redcastle, to supply the void in Sibyl's wardrobe. Five-and-
venty pounds is not much for a young lady of large ideas, but
byl, schooled in the philosophy of small means, makes the most
that sum. She spends all her money at Carmichael's, and
usts to Providence and Stephen Trenchard for means to pay
iss Eylett for the making up of her dresses, and Mr. Korksoll,
e bootmaker, for the equipment of her pretty little feet. It is
stonishing how far away from the thoughts of Miss Eylett and
r. Korksoll seems the notion of payment now that Miss Faun-
horpe's rich uncle has returned from the Indies. "You are to
nd the things home to me at Lancaster Lodge," says Sibyl,
d that seems as good as paying for them.

Sibyl has asked for a week in which to prepare herself for this
nportant visit, and that week is occupied in the stitching,
emming, sewing, felling, gathering, and trimming of under-
othing — the fashion of ready-made linen not having yet
itiated the housewifely habits of Redcastle. The lower middle
asses make their own garments, laboriously, and are proud of
eir toil; the upper classes employ school children, reduced
idows, or virtuous orphans for the labour, and contrive thereby
exercise a good deal of patronage at a very small expenditure.

Sibyl revives considerably during this week of preparation.
he manages to rest a good deal, other people taking the chief
urden of getting her clothes made on their shoulders. She lies
the sofa in the shabby old parlour, staring idly at the white
d yellow spring flowers that brighten the dull brown beds

yonder in the familiar garden, the white pear blossoms tossing gaily in the light April wind, the jonquils peeping over the tall box border, the sword-shaded lily of the valley leaves cleaving the damp mould in the shadow of the bulging moss-grown wall, summer's harbinger in the shape of a butterfly skimming over the tender rose leaves. A dull old house verily—a limited prospect, this long strip of walled garden, yet sweet and soothing to one who has suffered. Sweet to lie at rest on the slumberous sofa, with no thought or care for the day, and with but vaguest thought of the morrow.

"If uncle Trenchard leaves me a fortune life will be made so easy," Sibyl muses, her arms folded above her head, her eyes fixed dreamily on the waving white pearl-bloom, "I shall have but to call Alex back to me, and we can be happy together again, and taste the sweets of life again, as we did in our brief bright honeymoon. Poverty and love cannot live long together; but love with plenty of money—*that* means paradise."

The future, dimly veiled though it is, seems very easy to her just now. She is elated by her uncle's evident admiration of her. She has made just the impression that she would have wished to make upon that fate-disposing relative. To follow up that impression will be simple enough. Has she not been told of her winning ways, of those small fascinations which make a woman powerful for good or evil? Has she not been always her uncle Robert's favourite, everybody's favourite, without effort on her own part? while Marion, painfully anxious to please, has been looked on rather as a nuisance, a vivacious nonentity of whom one might easily have too much.

Mr. Trenchard's carriage calls every afternoon, with its coachman and footman in respectable Puritan drab liveries, to take the two young ladies for an airing; Mr. Trenchard himself rarely making any use of the equipage, which he keeps rather as an appendage of his state than for pleasure or convenience. It is very agreeable to Sibyl to drive up the long street, with its ascending scale of social importance, from the shabby old houses at uncle Robert's end of the town to the stately stone mansions above Bar. Very agreeable to pass the *élite* whom Marion has just begun to know, and salutes with delighted becks and bows, but whom Sibyl surveys with a stony stare, affecting to have not the faintest notion who they are.

"That Faunthorpe girl is handsomer than ever," says Colonel Stormont to his wife, whom he is driving in a pony carriage a size or two larger than a washing basket. "She is pretty sure to come in for a tidy share of the old fellow's money, I should think. Not a bad match for Frederick."

Frederick is the hope of the Stormonts—great at cricket, croquet, and athletics, fire brigade and volunteer rifle corps; a youth with very thin legs, and not much body, who wears a cutaway coat that just clears his hips, and has never been seen in an overcoat, or without a flower in his button-hole.

"No family," says Mrs. Stormont, pursing up her lips.

"Family be bothered!" remarks the colonel. "Old Trenchard is rolling in money. What's the good of family? It won't keep a roof over your head, or pay the tax-gatherer. Commerce is the thing now-a-days. If Fred doesn't marry a rich woman pretty soon he'll have to go into commerce. You ought to take notice of those Faunthorpe girls."

"I'll call next week," replies Mrs. Stormont, obediently.

Sibyl's beauty is the talk of the town. Redcastle is suddenly awakened to the consciousness of loveliness that scarcely moved it to admiration two years ago, although the girl's beauty had then the bloom and freshness of unchastened youth. Perhaps she is really lovelier now. Sorrow and passion have passed there, and left the exalted look of an awakened soul, where there was before only girlish innocence, curious and wondering about a world of which it knew nothing. She has eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The mystery of life has been revealed to her. Be sure that Eve's beauty had a deeper meaning after she came out by the fatal gate where the angel with the flaming sword kept watch and ward.

The carriage comes at the week's end to fetch Miss Faunthorpe and her belongings, to the tribulation of her young sister Jenny, who has had so much of Marion lately that she is deeply grieved to lose Sibyl.

"It will be ever so much worse for me when you're gone," she says. "You do stand up for a fellow sometimes. She'll be sending me upstairs for her handkerchief or her keys three times an hour, and making me crimp her hair till my fingers ache, and unpick her old dresses. I wish uncle Trenchard would let me go with you. I shouldn't cost much or be in his way. And now uncle Robert says I'm not to go to school any more, because it makes me vulgar, and Marion is to go on with my education. A nice education it will be! I don't believe she knows when William the Conqueror came over, or who invented potatoes."

Sibyl tears herself from the lamenting damsel, kisses uncle Robert with a plaintive little look more expressive of gratitude than many a lengthy oration, and takes her place in the barouche, which becomes her as a frame does a picture, and seems as much her attribute as Juno's car to the goddess.

"Good-bye, Poverty," she says to herself as the chestnuts throw up their fore-legs as if they were playing cup and ball, and dash off towards the Bar. "It shall go hard with me if my name is not written in Uncle Trenchard's will before long."

CHAPTER XI.

HOW STEPHEN TRENCHARD FORGIVES.

The new life at Lancaster Lodge suits Sibyl as if she had been created for no other purpose than to sit at her uncle's table, pour out his coffee, air his newspapers, play or sing to him in the evenings, and take her own pleasure for the rest of the day. Housekeeping is an easy burden in so well-ordered an establishment. The trained servants perform their duties, light for the most part, with mechanical precision. The service is too good to be forfeited by scamped work, or forgetfulness of the master's wishes. Stephen Trenchard has let his servants understand that he will have fullest value for his money, that there must be no talents stowed away in napkins in his household. He has contrived to inspire them with wholesome fear, and is served to the utmost of their power.

Sibyl is not afflicted with a genius for domestic matters. She remembers with a shudder those days in Dixon Street when she had to cater for a penniless husband, and make ninepence do the work of a shilling. She remembers this weary time, and reposes in her low easy chair, novel in hand, the garden smiling at her through the open French window, horses and carriages at her disposal, luxury around her, all Redcastle subjugated and more or less prostrated at her feet,—she keenly remembers the past, and deems her present life worthy some sacrifice, more especially as the present is made still brighter by vague hopes of happiness, and a reconciliation of all life's perplexities in the future.

She has her dark moments, naturally. What life is without shadow? There are moments when she thinks of one she has fondly loved—fondly loves still, perhaps, in some sealed chamber of her heart. There are hours in which she wonders, with remorseful wonder, how *he* fares whom she so ruthlessly abandoned.

"For his future advantage," she tells herself; "as Mrs. Secretan I should have forfeited my uncle's fortune—as Miss Faunthorpe I may win it and share it with my husband."

Established as Stephen Trenchard's favourite niece, Sibyl finds herself an object of unbounded interest and admiration with the *élite.* Mrs. Stormont, although overflowing with kindness, at first shows some disposition to patronize, but finding this eldest Miss Faunthorpe a young woman not amenable to patronage, changes her note and accepts Mr. Trenchard's niece as "one of ourselves," elected and chosen to sit in the high places of Redcastle.

"The girl has a wonderful air," argues Mrs. Stormont, "when ou consider that she is totally without family."

"Talking of family," muses the colonel, "I hope it's all right bout old Trenchard's money, and that he hasn't left any niggers ver in Calcutta to whom he may leave his fortune."

"My dear Reginald, I'm surprised at you," exclaims the lady, ith a look of horror. "Mr. Trenchard goes to church every unday, and is altogether a most correct person.

"We don't know what he may have been in India, though," ys the colonel. "He may have been a devil-worshipper, and anced an exaggerated highland fling at devil-dances; or a ahometan, or a Brahmin, or a Thug. He seems to have plenty f money, and that's about all we know of him."

Notwithstanding which ignorance as to Stephen Trenchard's ntecedents the colonel and his wife continue to court and cherish im, arranging the nicest little dinners for him, with Mr. Groshen sit opposite to him and discourse upon the money market; vishing affection on Sibyl, inquiring kindly about the exiled arion—as remote at the unvisited end of the town as if she had een removed to another hemisphere—and making themselves nerally subservient and agreeable. Frederick Stormont, with s cutaway coat and legs like sticks of sealing wax, calls freently at Lancaster Lodge, and is deeply interested in everything at interests Sibyl,—the flower-garden, the horses; he even lunteers to be interested in the poultry, but bottles his thusiasm upon finding that Miss Faunthorpe has no taste for orkings, Spaniards, or Cochin-Chinas.

There is a billiard-room at Lancaster Lodge, and Frederick is eat at billiards. He drops in of an evening, and plays with r. Trenchard; he teaches Sibyl how to handle her cue, and disurses wisely on the theory of angles.

"Well, pretty one," says Mr. Trenchard one night, when Fred s taken his departure with obvious reluctance, and uncle and ece are loitering by the billiard-table, Sibyl leaning over the een cloth to aim at the distant red, dressed in pale gray silk, ith innumerable flounces, and knots of mauve ribbon dotted out among them, a masterpiece of Miss Eylett's art. "Well, y pet, I think it's pretty clear what that young gentleman comes re for."

"Billiards, I should think," replies Sibyl, pushing her cue gently ckwards and forwards as she meditates her aim. "They have table at the Stormonts, and it is cheaper for him to play here an at the 'Coach and Horses.'"

"The billiard-table is a very good excuse, my dear, but the ntleman comes to see you."

"Poor thread-paper!" exclaimed Sibyl, with a contemptuous gh. "For his own sake—if the thing can feel—I hope not."

"Why, he'd be a very good match for you, wouldn't he?" asks her uncle, looking keenly at her from under his penthouse brows. "These Stormonts are great people, the leaders of Redcastle society. You could hardly do better than marry into their set."

"If I were likely ever to marry, which I'm not," says Sibyl, pocketing her ball triumphantly off the red, "I'd marry a *man*."

"Never likely to marry! what do you mean by that?"

"Simply that I'm quite happy as I am, and that I mean to stop with you, and take care of you, please uncle Stephen, until you get tired of me."

She has been living with her rich uncle nearly three months, and there is no more talk of her being a visitor at Lancaster Lodge. It is her home. Marion may come and go, but Sibyl remains. Stephen Trenchard cannot do without her.

"I shan't get tired of you in a hurry," answers Mr. Trenchard, "but I think for your own sake you ought to marry when you get a good opportunity. I was only joking about that whipper-snapper, who walks about the place as if the very paving stones were his property, and couldn't give you change for a five-pound note if you asked him for it. He's not the man for you. But with your pretty face you are sure to find the right kind of man before long, a man with brains and money, and when you do I hope you'll be wise enough to marry him. It's all very well while I'm here to take care of you, but when I'm dead and gone——"

"When you are dead and gone I shall have your money, you dear old thing," thinks Sibyl, but says not a word. She only goes to her uncle's side, and lays her face upon his shoulder, and gives him one of those gentle little caresses which Marion would as soon have offered to the Zoological Garden's tiger as to her Anglo-Indian uncle.

"Yes, pretty one, I should like to see you well married before my time comes," says Stephen Trenchard.

"Now you know, uncle, that you are under a solemn agreement with me to live till you are ninety," replies Sibyl, shaking her finger at him with playful menace.

She has grown very intimate with her uncle in these three months, her playing, her singing, her bright talk, her sparkling, vivacious little ways have won the old man's confidence. Stern to all the rest of the world, implacable in all his dealing with men, suspicious alike of equals and inferiors, tyrannical to his servants, he is yet wondrously gentle to Sibyl. His inherent meanness, his mental incapacity to give, cannot be wholly subjugated even by her influence, but what money he bestows upon her he gives less grudgingly than to Marion. He feels the loss of so many pounds a shade less keenly when Sibyl's pleasure is in question, and though he grumbles sorely at the costliness of a

oman's toilet he is pleased to see his niece expensively dressed,
ıd may in time come to regard her costume as one of the acces-
ries of his own grandeur, like his stables or hothouses.

Rarely, despite the confidence that is established between them,
.s Mr. Trenchard talked to Sibyl of his past life, of his youth
ever. He tells her his prosy old stories of Calcutta society, of
en with whom he has had commercial dealings, of clever frauds
.d chicaneries which he chuckles over as the *coups d'état* of the
ading world, but of himself he speaks very little. Never, above
, has the fatal name of Secretan crossed his lips; and Sibyl is
nging to find out the state of his feelings now, after this lapse
time, in relation to that name.

If he had learned, in the lapse of years, to forgive the man he
jured and over-reached, if he had grown to feel some touch of
norseful pity for the supplanted son, what a happiness it
ould be to fall on her knees at his feet and confess the secret
her life, to be pardoned for her duplicity, set free from the
l and trouble of falsehood, able to call her proud young hus-
nd back to her side, and to begin life again, honest in the sight
man and at peace with God!

She is continually musing upon this question, and would give
ıch for an opportunity of sounding her uncle's feelings. It
nes one day unawares, and she has no longer need to speculate
wonder about Stephen Trenchard's sentiments upon the sub-
t of an old enemy.

t is a drowsy July afternoon. The summer is at its hottest,
l Mr. Trenchard and his niece are sitting on the lawn after
t elaborate meal, half breakfast, half luncheon, which the
glo-Indian calls tiffin. The lawn behind Lancaster Lodge is
elightful place on a warm summer day. Three or four old
ıs, a spreading cedar, a Spanish chestnut, and a couple of
le plane trees afford abundant shade. The grass is smooth
velvet. Garden chairs, low and luxurious, are dotted about
ler the trees. Newspapers, and Sibyl's work-basket, bestrew
light iron table. Changing lights and shadows flit and flicker
ng the leaves, and Stephen Trenchard's lean figure, stretched
ts full length, reposes at ease on a bamboo reclining chair, a
ss of potash water on one side of him, a cigar-case on the
er.

ibyl is reading to him out of yesterday's *Times*, when he
rrupts her with a sudden sigh, which is almost a groan.

What is the matter, uncle Stephen?"

You had better leave off,—even your soft voice irritates
,"

Your nervous headache not gone yet, uncle Stephen?"

Gone! It's worse than ever. This English summer is more
ressive than Indian heat, or it seems so to me at any rate."

Sibyl searches in the little work-basket lined with blue satin, fishes out a silver-stoppered scent-bottle, and is on her knees by her uncle's side in a moment, dabbing his yellow forehead with her handkerchief steeped in eau de Cologne.

"Thank you, my dear, that will do. I don't care about it."

He gives her an impatient little push, as disapproving so much fuss, but not before she has disarranged one of those terrier-ear wisps of iron-gray hair, and been startled by a scar which disfigures the forehead beneath it, a long narrow seam, which crosses the temple diagonally just below the roots of the hair.

"Uncle Stephen, were you ever in battle?"

"Battle, child? What nonsense! Of course not."

"Or in a mutiny—or anything? How did you get this dreadful scar?"

"From the foul blow of a scoundrel," answers Stephen Trenchard, deadly pale. "From the man who lamed me for life. Did you never hear your mother speak of Philip Secretan?"

"Yes, uncle Stephen, I have heard her say that he treated you very badly."

"Oh, she owned as much, did she? The world in general would have it that I used him badly, that I had no right to the money his father left me—a paltry thirty thousand; that I ought to have stood on one side and said, 'No, blood is thicker than water. You've been an idler and a profligate—a bad son, the business would have gone to wreck and ruin if it had been left to you to save it. I've toiled, I've slaved, I've planned and plotted, I've borne the heat and burden of the day; but still you are the son, and you've a right to come in at the eleventh hour and rob me of my just reward, simply because you are the son.' That's what the world would have had me do, in the high and mighty justice it is so good at dealing out for other people, and so bad at yielding on its own account. Some went so far as to say that the will was forged, and I was the forger. Luckily for me, old Mr. Secretan had published his intention of disinheriting his son, and making me his heir, the year of the great Manchester failures, when his house tottered, and I had the luck to save it by a desperate stroke of business."

"He was very fond of you, I suppose, this old Mr. Secretan?" asks Sibyl, breathlessly.

"Fond of me? Yes, perhaps as much as it was in his nature to be fond of anything, except money. He hated his son, knowing that he was a spendthrift, and would squander every shilling the old man had toiled for. He trusted me—he looked up to me. 'If you were my son,' he used to say, 'I shouldn't be tortured by the thought that this business would go to ruin when I'm in my grave.' The day he said that for the first time I made up my mind that I was to be his heir. Philip's follie nd vices helped me, but my own patience and industry were e chief agents."

" And there was a quarrel between you and Philip Secretan ?" ks Sibyl, seated on the grass and plucking up little tufts of it rvously, as she watches her uncle's vindictive face with eager es, reading doom there.

" Yes, when the will had been read, and he knew the worst— e ought to have expected it if he had a grain of sense,—Philip cretan followed me out into the grounds. His father's house as a few miles outside Manchester, a fine old place enough, but glected,—the old man was too fond of money to spend much n house or gardens. Philip followed me to the back of the ounds, where there was a wild bit of shrubbery and a hollow at had once been a stone quarry, and which had been left, her because people didn't care about the expense of filling it, because they fancied it was picturesque. In any case it was ngerous, and an abomination that ought to have been done ay with. Well, I was close to the edge of this hollow—there ing a short cut to the Manchester road just beyond it—when ilip overtook me. He didn't spare me, I can tell you, for, art from the money question, there was an old sore between The girl he wanted to marry had done me the honour to efer his father's confidential clerk. She was a sensible girl, and w the point to which our lives were drifting. When he had led me reptile, and a few other equally agreeable names, ding that he couldn't sting me into retaliation by abuse of that d, he came close up to me and struck me across the face with open hand. 'There, cur,' he cried, 'and let's see if that will rn your fish's blood into manly feeling.' I had been in a rning rage all the time at his insolence, but had held myself check, in pity for his disappointment, which was hard to bear, doubt, richly as he had deserved it. I was a man, and the me of a blow was too much even for my sluggish temper, ined to patience by long servitude. I closed with him, and we estled together on that path by the quarry. Now mark the wardice of this fine gentleman, who boasted of his honour, and led me a sneak and reptile! He was twice my match in ight and size, three times my match in training, a practised lete, a skilled boxer, every muscle developed by exercise. To his force against mine was simply murder. I was the ttlecock, and he the battledore. I had a confused sense of ws raining on my head, as from a Nasmyth's hammer, coloured rks dancing before my eyes, fire shooting out of my brain, d then I was hurled bodily into the air, and fell crashing ough the brushwood into the quarry. It seemed like falling m the highest cliff that breasts the Atlantic."

' How dreadful!" says Sibyl, with a gasp.

"It was deep in the night when I awoke, and the stars were shining. I wondered where I was, and how I came to see the pole-star looking straight down at me. Pain came before memory, acute, agonizing pain, and then I knew that my leg had been shattered somehow. I lay in the quarry till past eight o'clock next morning, suffering indescribable torture. At last, however, some labourers heard my faint cries for help, found me, and carried me to the nearest roadside inn, whence I was conveyed to the Manchester Infirmary. Here I lay for five months—the most miserable months of my life—while the fractured bones united. It was a compound fracture, and for some time I was threatened with amputation. When I rose from the hospital bed I was lame for life. The broken leg had contracted in the process of healing. Surgery had done its best for me, and had saved my leg; but surgery left me a cripple, for which life-long injury I had to thank Philip Secretan. I had to thank him for something else too, for the girl who had pretended to love me chose this time for throwing me over, and making a better match."

"And in those weary months, lying on your bed of pain, you learned to forgive your enemy," suggests Sibyl, very gently.

"Learned to forgive him! Yes, if forgiveness means undying hatred; if forgiveness means the rankling memory of an unatonable wrong; if forgiveness means to remember him and curse him every time a change of wind brings back the old grinding pain in this crippled limb. If that means forgiveness, Philip Secretan and his race are forgiven."

"His race?" falters Sibyl. "You could feel no rancour against his children."

"I could. I do," answers the old man, vindictively. "Let no viper of that blood cross my path. 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' There's Scripture for you. I believe in that good old heathen creed one reads of in Greek legends, of an accursed race. Of Philip Secretan's after career I know little or nothing. He had the devil's luck as well as his own, and married a woman with money, soon after his father's death, but I never heard what became of him. He may be living or dead. If he lives let him keep out of my way. If he has left children, my dearest hope is that they are penniless, homeless, street Arabs, whose playground is the gutter, whose ultimate destiny is the gallows."

"Uncle, for mercy's sake—— "

"My curse light on him and his seed to the third generation! There, child, don't cry. You should have known better than to tempt me to talk of Philip Secretan."

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE, THEN, HAD HOPE OF RICHER STORE.

FTER that summer day under the plane-trees, Sibyl utters the
ame of Secretan no more. Hope of relenting on her uncle's
art there is none. If Alexis could forgive the man who in his
ersion of the story came basely between father and son to cheat
e son of his heritage, and tricked the lover out of his mistress,
tephen Trenchard's stubborn soul would still remain unsoftened.
econciliation between these two was impossible. To retain her
ncle's favour and inherit a portion of his wealth, Sibyl must
ep the secret of her marriage. A painful part to play even
r a mind not untrained in deceit; but a necessary part, Sibyl
lls herself. A difficult game, but for a stake well worth the
inning. She has no exact measure of her uncle's possessions.
e has never talked to her of his investments, or told her his
come, but she has a fixed idea that his wealth is almost without
nit, that, like the Rothschilds or the Duke of Westminister, he
uld scarcely state the sum-total of his riches if he were asked
r exact figures. His fortune is a rolling mass of gold, she
pposes, which grows larger at every turn, like a snowball.
e respects he sees paid to him by the elect of Redcastle estab-
shes her in this conviction of Stephen Trenchard's importance,
r she knows that in this case importance can only mean money.
Lancaster Lodge is one of those handsomely finished, solidly
uilt houses which adorn the outskirts of every country town,
d are like temples dedicated to the genius of commonplace;
uses in which the butler's pantry has been as carefully
nsidered as the drawing-room, and in which my lady's boudoir
just as unlovely as John Thomas's attic under the leads.
l the principal rooms are large and square and lofty. The
ssages are broad and straight. The staircase is well propor-
ned, ventilated and lighted to perfection. Impossible to find
ult with a house which, as the house agent proudly puts it,
ssesses all the requirements for a gentleman's family. Equally
possible to feel the slightest interest in a mansion which
ither awes by its splendour nor attracts by its eccentricity,
r charms by the lowlier graces of homeliness and simplicity.
coffin descending that mathematical staircase would loose its
fulness in the pervading atmosphere of commonplace. A
dle in any of those rooms would seem to have lost its way,
d wandered into a desert, where baby-life could not endure.
sadly sweet fancies of domestic joys that are no more entwine

themselves about this dwelling of Stephen Trenchard's. It looks like what it is—an old bachelor's house,—and Mr. Trenchard could hardly have chosen a habitation more completely in harmony with his own character.

The Redcastle upholsterer, a man whose stock in trade appears to consist of two easy chairs and a sideboard—but who can do great things at a push,—has furnished Lancaster Lodge with appropriate splendour. All is solid and grandiose; dark crimson draperies—velvet in the dining-room and library, satin brocade in the drawing-room—subdue the garish light and give a sombre grandeur to the rooms. Heavy oak furniture, thickest Turkey and Persian carpets; varied spoil of carved black wood, ivory, porcelain, and Bombay inlaid work, which Mr. Trenchard has brought home with him from India,—everywhere the evidence of wealth.

To Sibyl the house seems simply perfect. Its luxury, its soft silent splendour, contrast so pleasantly with the humble homeliness of her uncle Robert's old-fashioned, low-ceiled rooms; the stealthy-footed footman, who spends so much of his time looking at nothing particular out of the hall window, that he grows sedentary in his habits, and fancies he has disease of the heart; the ponderous butler in his glossy black suit and irreproachable white tie; the smart maid-servants, in crisped starched cambric, tight-waisted, prim, supercilious, as if Mr. Trenchard's importance as the richest man in Redcastle shed reflected glory upon them. The household has an air of quiet dignity which impresses Sibyl wonderfully. Her soul reposes itself in this land of fatness. She looks back at her life in Dixon Street, its one room, its manifold privations, veritable starvation hovering near like the wan spectre of approaching doom, and the change seems too wonderful for anything but a dream. Does she think of the husband who shared her poverty, whom she abandoned to endure misfortune alone, deserted in the darkest hour of their wedded life? What does she not think of him? Memory and regret are interwoven with the fabric of her life. She consoles herself—justifies her desertion of Alexis—by the idea that life must have been made easy to him by their separation. As a married man with a helpless wife to provide for, he was like a vessel waterlogged; relieved of that burden, he is the same ship free to sail for any port in quest of fortune.

One night, in the solitude of her prettily furnished bedroom, all rose-coloured chintz and shining maple, furnished especially for a young lady's occupation at Mr. Trenchard's order, Sibyl takes out an insignificant paper-covered book from among her most sacred possessions, and opens it with a hand that trembles a little as she sits alone in the lamplight. It is like opening the grave of the past. That little sixpenny book is the diary she kept at Mrs. Hazleton's—her brief love story.

Tearfully, sorrowfully, she reads that record of her first and only love, the story of a time when in singleness of mind and simplicity she surrendered her heart to its conqueror.

"I love him, I love him, I love him," she reads, almost blinded by tears. She remembers the gush of passionate feeling with which those foolish words were written. "And one little year after I wrote that line I deserted him," she says to herself, wondering at her own hardness of heart.

"What a fool I must have been when I wrote this book!" This is her verdict as she closes the volume; yet she feels as if it were the best and brightest part of her life in which those foolish pages were written, and that she was happier in those days than she is now, although she has become a personage in Redcastle.

She looks round her room wonderingly, glancing at the maple wardrobe which contains so many pretty dresses, such a treasury of ribbons and lace, and the frivolities women love.

"Would I exchange all this, and the hope of a fortune from my uncle, for the dismal second-floor schoolroom at Mrs. Hazleton's, and the freshness and sweetness of first love?" she asks herself; and for a moment it seems to her that could a good fairy give her back the days that are no more, she would be a gainer by the exchange.

If she could know that her husband was safe and well, that he had prospered since she left him, or that things had gone tolerably well with him, she might feel more at ease than she does. But she knows nothing of what has happened to him since the beginning of the year, when he was seen at Redcastle, a dismal apparition: and of this appearance of his she only hears by chance, a few days after her perusal of her diary, from no less a person than her younger sister Jane, otherwise Jenny.

Sibyl is spending the day with her uncle Robert, a visit which ranks as a condescension now that she is on intimate terms with the Stormonts, the Groshens, Dr. Mitsand, and, in a word, the *élite* of Redcastle. She is received by her indulgent old uncle with all honour. Hester prepares an extra good dinner, a dainty little loin of veal, and a currie of yesterday's roast mutton, followed by the unwonted extravagance of a tart and a pudding. Marion sees this relaxation of the economic bow with certain sniffings and bridlings, indicative of suppressed indignation.

"I never knew such a time-server as Hester," she remarks, as she surveys the table, laid as for a feast, a clean tablecloth in the middle of the week, almonds and raisins for dessert, an altogether ruinous expenditure. "She didn't make this fuss about you when you were at home, but now she pays her court to the heiress elect."

"No more an heiress elect than you or Jenny, I should imagine," replies Sibyl, lightly. "I think it is pretty clear that uncle Trenchard means to leave his money among us, though he has not said as much."

"Yes, and the lion's share to you, no doubt, though he has known me longest," says Marion, snappishly.

"A precious sight of his money I'm likely to get, when he never so much as asks me to go and see him," observes Jenny, whereupon both sisters swoop down upon her in denunciation of such a noun of quantity as "a precious sight."

"Where do you pick up your language, child?" cries Sibyl. "Not in the streets surely, since Marion teaches you, and you have no occasion to be running about."

"A fat lot Marion teaches me!" says the incorrigible child. "She nags at me for an hour and a half by the kitchen clock every morning, and calls that education."

"Pray, in what edition of Lindley Murray do you find the verb 'to nag?'" demands Marion, with the air of a pedagogue.

"It's as good a verb as any other. I nag, thou naggest, he or she nags, generally she; or take it in Latin if you like, Nago, nagas, nagat, nagamus, nagatis, nagant; first conjugation; perfect, nagavi."

"I'm afraid that Jane has rather an unruly temper," remarks Dr. Faunthorpe, mildly.

"Oh, of course it's Jane. Marion is never aggravating. *You* don't find me unruly, do you, uncle?" Jane adds coaxingly, as she sidles up to the gentle, easy-tempered little doctor, who has gone through life placidly bearing other people's burdens, and has never murmured against a destiny that has weighted him with three orphan nieces.

Later in the afternoon Sibyl and Jane are alone together in the garden, Marion having lost her temper at croquet, and left them to themselves.

The little bit of grass upon which they play is not many sizes bigger than the billiard-table at Lancaster House. The balls and mallets are in the last stage of shabbiness, and chipped into icosahedrons.

"You must both come to afternoon tea to-morrow, if it's fine, and play croquet on uncle Trenchard's lawn," says Sibyl, condescendingly, as if she were inviting them to her own house. Perhaps this patronizing invitation has something to do with Marion's loss of temper five minutes afterwards, when Jenny sends her ball into a distant cabbage bed. The sources of bad humour are more often complex than simple.

It is a warm September afternoon, one of those days in which people incline to sitting in gardens rather than walking on dusty high roads. Sibyl sits on the grass as she was wont to do three years ago, before she was anybody's heiress. Jenny sprawls, with an appalling display of legs and boots and rusty bootlaces, at her sister's side.

"Now, Sibyl!" she says, eagerly, "tell us about the parties you go to."

"Pray, who is your companion?" inquires Sibyl, with a contemptuous droop of her heavy eyelids. "I see no one here but yourself."

"I don't know what you mean," says Jane, staring.

"No more do I when you say tell *us*."

"Oh, lor, as if it mattered! You're as bad as Marion. Now do be nice, Sib, for once in a way, and tell me what it's like going to the Stormonts. Only fancy you're being asked there ever so many times; and to think how often I've passed their door when we've been out for walks, and the inside of it has seemed as far off as heaven; further, indeed, for they say we're sure to go to heaven if we're good, but we're not sure of going to the Stormonts unless we're rich. What's it like, Sib? do tell."

"Well, they live in a house, as you know, since you've seen the outside of it, and they eat their dinner at a table, just as we do, and they are rather stupid after dinner, and the ladies go up into the drawing-room and talk about other people who are not there, and a little about the minister, and the clergyman, and the schools, and look at one another's dresses. I can see them count the flounces on my dress sometimes, and actually take the pattern of it under my nose, which I consider an impertinence."

"Is it nice going to grand dinners?" asks Jane, breathlessly.

"Yes, I suppose so. It's rather a mild kind of enjoyment. It loesn't quicken one's pulse by a single throb. It isn't like riding a good horse, or seeing a race, or hearing a great singer, or even getting a good break at billiards. There's no excitement, no lation; but one feels one is doing the right kind of thing, that his is what one was born for."

"Are the dinners nice?" inquires Jenny, licking her lips gluttonously.

"They are very grand," replies Sibyl. "I don't know that I hould care about *vol-au-vent à la Financière*, or *petites timbales de ibier* for a continuance, and with so many made dishes one has he idea that one is eating up all the cold meat that has accumuated in the last week; and one gets rather tired of seeing saddle f mutton and boiled fowls everywhere,—for whether you call owls *poulets à la Béchamelle*, or *chapons en demi-deuil*, they are ery much the same birds."

"Capons in half-mourning! That is funny. Do you know hat *my* favourite dinner is, Sib? Bullock's heart with veal uffing and currant jelly. Do you ever have *that* at Colonel ormont's?"

"You must never mention such a dish, Jenny. It's positively revolting."

"But you used to like it, and liver and bacon, and sheep's head with parsley and butter. But never mind your dinners, tell me about your beaux. Marion says that young Mr. Stormont was in love with her until you lured him away."

"Marion is a —— fool."

"You must have lots of lovers now that you go into such grand society, Sib, because you are the beauty of the family, you know. We all know that, and that's what makes Marion so cross sometimes. 'I'm nobody,' she says; and then she squeezes her waist in another half-inch, and fancies she has got the better of you. She's awfully proud of her figure, you know,"

"You mustn't talk disrespectfully of your elder sister, Jenny," remonstrates Sibyl, yawning. The plebeian two o'clock dinner, and the game of croquet in the afternoon sun have made her sleepy.

"Then I won't talk of her at all. Tell me about your lovers, Sib, that's a deal more interesting."

"Nonsense, child! I have no lovers."

"But you had one once. Yes, I saw somebody who was in love with you once, though he must have gone down in the world dreadfully since you had had anything to say to him, for he looked little better than a beggar when I saw him."

Sibyl has sunk into a reclining attitude, with half-closed eyes, and is dropping into a gentle doze, but at this speech of Jane's she starts into a sitting posture again, and looks intently at her sister, very pale.

"What do you mean?" she cries. "What was he like? Where did you see him? When? Tell me all about it this instant."

"Ah, I see you know the person I speak of. You wouldn't be in such a way if you didn't. How pale you are, Sibyl! Do you care for him very much?"

"Will you tell me what you are talking about, child?" exclaims Sibyl, passionately.

Jane begins her story with deliberation and importance.

"I have always kept it a secret," she prefaces, "feeling that it might get you into a row with uncle and Marion, and I've wanted to tell you about it ever since you came home, but have never had a chance of being alone with you till this afternoon."

"For goodness' sake go on. What was the man like?"

"Very handsome and noble-looking, though his clothes were dreadfully shabby. His coat was shabbier than uncle's, snuff and all, but it looked as if it had been a more gentlemanly coat in its day; and as for his poor boots, it made my heart bleed to see them. I wanted to give him my new shilling, one uncle Robert gave me on Christmas Day, for it was the day after New Year's Day that I saw the man, you know——"

"I know nothing. Never mind how you came by the shilling."

"But he pushed away my hand gently, and said, 'No, my dear, I'm not a beggar, though I dare say I look like one.'"

"Poor fellow," sighs Sibyl.

"Oh, Sibyl, I did feel so ashamed of myself for having offered him that shilling,—ever so much ashameder than he did," adds Jenny, coining a comparative in the impetuosity of her speech.

"Can't you tell me about it straight—beginning at the beginning?" demands Sibyl, impatiently.

"Well, it was the day after New Year's Day. I detest New Year's Day. Church in the morning, and dulness in the afternoon—and I came into the garden to have a run all by myself, and to get out of Marion's way. It was a little after four, between the lights, you know, and a wretchedly cold afternoon. Well, you know the lane at the bottom of the garden——"

"Of course," says Sibyl, with an involuntary glance in that direction. Beyond the plot of lucerne there is a low wall, and on the other side of the wall an accommodation road leading to a neighbouring farm.

"Well, he was there, looking over the wall, and he beckoned to me. I was afraid at first, thinking he might be a robber, but as I had nothing but my hoop to be robbed of I went up to the wall to look at him, and then I saw somehow in a moment that he was a gentleman, though I am sure you wouldn't have given twopence for his hat."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me if my name was Faunthorpe, and then if I had a sister called Sibyl. 'Yes,' says I, 'but she's away in London.' 'Where?' says he. 'At Mrs. Hazleton's, Lowther Street, Eccleston Square,' says I. 'Is that all you know about her?' says he. 'What more can I know about her?' says I. 'She's very happy, I believe, and she's very well,—at least, she was when uncle heard from her last.' 'When was that?' says he. 'About three weeks ago,' says I. And then he sighed heavily, and he looked so white and tired that I pitied him with all my heart."

"Poor fellow," sighed Sibyl again.

"Ah, you do know him then?" cries Jane.

"How can I tell? He didn't tell you his name, I suppose."

"Not a bit of it. He asked me a lot of questions about you. Did we expect you home soon? and so on, but I could tell him no more than I had told him at first. You were at Mrs. Hazleton's, and you were likely to stay there, for anything I knew. I didn't know that uncle Robert wanted you to come home at that time. They don't take *me* into their confidence."

"You didn't mention uncle Trenchard?" asks Sibyl, with a scared look.

"Of course not; why should I go and mention our rich uncle to a wandering tramp that might go and steal his plate? At least, I don't mean that, for when once I heard the poor thing speak it never entered my mind that he was anything but a gentleman. Who is he, Sibyl? Do tell me. Some one who fell in love with you in London; saw you go in by Mrs. Hazleton's carriage perhaps, and fell in love with you at first sight, and followed you about everywhere, and neglected his profession, and went to the dogs for your sake. Do tell me all about him."

"How do I know who the man was?" says Sibyl, absently. There is no shadow of doubt in her mind. This wanderer was her husband, who had come to Redcastle in quest of her.

"I'll describe him if you like. I can see him before me at this moment. He is tall and dark, with rather large features, regular features, but striking, not one of those straight-nosed waxwork faces one sees in a hairdresser's shop. His lower lip projects a little, which gives him rather a scornful look till he smiles, and then he has the kindest expression. 'Dear child,' he said, and patted my shoulder so kindly, 'you are just a little like your sister when you look up at me as you are looking now.' You won't think that a compliment, I know, Sib, but he said it. Who is he, Sib? Do tell me."

"I have not the remotest idea," replies Sibyl, with provoking indifference.

"Come now, you wouldn't have been so agitated when I spoke about him if you hadn't guessed who he was."

"I was not agitated," says Sibyl, pretending to yawn.

"Oh, very well, if you like to tell crammers, of course I can't help it. My experience of elder sisters is that they may break all the commandments with impunity, and drive a coach and six through the Catechism. I think they wash their hands of Christianity when they're confirmed."

"Jane, you are not only blasphemous, but you're extremely impertinent to *me*," exclaims Sibyl.

"Well, if that's all I get for keeping your secrets!"

"That was wise of you at any rate, Jenny," says Sibyl, making haste to relent. "Marion would have made no end of mischief out of nothing. Never mind the man in the lane, dear. We'll forget all about him. He was some foolish fellow, no doubt. And if you'd like a new frock for Sunday, Jenny, you shall have that pretty checked peach-coloured silk of mine, and I'll get Miss Eylett to make it up for you."

"Oh you dear!" cries Jane, crimsoning with rapture. "That lovely peach-colour! How sweet I shall look, if—" with a doubtful look at her well-worn boots—"if uncle Robert will only give me new boots."

"If he won't, I know somebody else who will. And, Jenny, if you could contrive to keep your hair a little smoother, and your hands a shade cleaner, you wouldn't be the worst-looking child in Redcastle," says Sibyl, drawing her younger sister towards her, and bestowing a condescending kiss upon that young person's forehead. "Now mind when you come to afternoon tea with me to-morrow you make yourself look as nice as ever you can."

"I'll do my best, Sib, but I know I shall feel shabby before those stuck-up servants. When is uncle Trenchard going to have Marion to stay with him again, do you think?"

"I don't know. That's a question I can't ask him, you see."

"I suppose not; but Marion's rather cut up at his not inviting her, you know. I say, Sib, I fancy Marion's nose is out of joint since you've come home."

Sibyl smiles—a self-satisfied smile. She is very sure of her uncle's preference—knows quite well that he considers Marion something of a simpleton, and not a little of a bore.

"It isn't my fault, Jenny, if uncle Trenchard likes me best," she says, complacently.

The sisters go into tea after this, Jenny with her arm round Sibyl's waist.

"I say, Sib, when you're married, and have a beautiful house of your own, you'll have me to stay with you sometimes, won't you? I'll be good, and keep my hair tidy."

"I mean never to marry, Jane; at least, not during uncle Trenchard's lifetime. I mean to keep his house for him, always."

"But he may live to be ninety—twenty years to come,—and a nice old woman you'd be by that time. Who'd have you then? You ought to marry now, Sib, while you have such advantages; that's what uncle Robert says. Do be married soon, that's a dear, and let me be your bridesmaid—in white muslin over pink silk. Is Frederick Stormont very nice?"

"He's absolutely detestable," replies Sibyl, and immediately without rhyme or reason bursts into tears. She is thinking of the fond and faithful husband who came to Redcastle in quest of her, and departed hopeless.

Where is he? what is he doing? how has he fared since that bleak January afternoon when he found his journey had been useless? Starving, perhaps; or worse—dead. Slain by his own hand in some dark hour of despair. Has she not reason to fear the worst of one she left without hope?

Three days later, by the help of her old ally, Mrs. Hazleton's housemaid, Jane Dimond, Sibyl contrives to insert the following advertisement in the second column of the *Times* supplement:—

"S. S. to Alexis.—You are not forgotten. In all I do I am faithful to you and your interests. I look forward to our reunion. Wait and hope, as I do. Write and tell me where you are, and what you are doing.—Address, S. S., Post Office, Hale Street, Pimlico."

This advertisement is inserted three times, and the housemaid inquires diligently at the Hale Street Post Office during the following fortnight for a letter addressed to S. S. No such letter comes, and Sibyl's vague fears of evil are intensified by this ominous silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWEETS OF LIFE.

NOT a word has been said by Mr. Trenchard as to his testamentary intentions in reference to his three nieces, but in the mind of Redcastle it is an established fact that Sibyl is to inherit the bulk of her uncle's property. The other two girls will get something, no doubt, Mrs. Stormont remarks obligingly to Mrs. Groshen, the banker's wife, as these two ladies take their afternoon tea together, ceremoniously, in the Stormont drawing-room, a spacious apartment with a good deal of white paneling, gold moulding, and looking-glass, and not much besides in the way of furniture, a barren tract of Brussels carpet, with an islet here and there in the shape of sofa, ottoman, or coffee-table.

"The other two girls will get something, of course—two hundred a year each, perhaps; and a very nice income too, for young women not likely to marry. But mark my words, Mrs. Groshen, Sibyl is the heiress. Mr. Trenchard positively doats upon her."

"Do you think her pretty?" asks the banker's wife, languidly. She has been esteemed a beauty in her time, on the strength of an aquiline nose and a large pale blue eye, and she does not particularly approve of these new lights.

"Well, yes, decidedly pretty—in her peculiar style. Features rather too sharp, perhaps, and a sad want of colour." The Miss Stormonts rejoice in vivid complexions. "But she has fine eyes."

"Yes, fine eyes," assents Mrs. Groshen.

"Though I cannot say I like their expression."

"No more do I," says Mrs. Groshen, warmly.

"Perhaps the nicest thing about her is her manner. She has really charming manners."

"Ye-es, very agreeable manners," drawls Mrs. Groshen.

"If they were not so painfully artificial."

"That's the very thing that struck me," says Mrs. Groshen, brightening.

The banker's wife rustles home in her silk attire, and tells Mr. Groshen at dinner how the Stormonts are trying to catch Mr. Trenchard's niece for their empty-headed son Frederick.

"This Mr. Trenchard is very rich, I suppose?" she says, interrogatively.

"Enormously. I wish he'd keep an account with us," replies the banker.

Sibyl accepts all the homage Redcastle can offer her, with a tranquility which raises her not a little in the estimation of the *élite*. She takes Mrs. Stormont's somewhat oppressive kindness as a matter of course, and is unawed by the splendour of the Groshens' dinner-table, which for plate, china, glass, floral decoration, and hothouse fruit, takes precedence of other tables in Redcastle.

"I don't pretend to do things as Mrs. Groshen does," the Redcastle matrons inform one another apologetically. "We can't all be bankers."

Mrs. Stormont volunteers her services in escorting Sibyl to concerts, and other local entertainments which a man of Mr. Trenchard's age may not care to patronize. Stephen Trenchard is quite willing that Sibyl should take advantage of these friendly offers, but, to his surprise, and perhaps gratification, the girl refuses.

"I am very fond of music, uncle Trenchard," she says, "but I shall not go out of an evening without you. That would be a pretty way of keeping you company."

"But, my dear, there is some difference between seventy and twenty. Crabbed age and youth cannot dwell together; or if they do, youth must have a holiday now and then."

"You are not crabbed, and I am very happy with you," answers Sibyl.

"Flatterer," exclaims Stephen Trenchard, not the less pleased.

"Artful hussy," thinks Mrs. Stormont, and by-and-by in the course of that cutting and wounding which passes for conversation in Redcastle, that lady informs Mrs. Groshen that Sibyl Faunthorpe is one of the deepest girls it was ever her fate to encounter.

"She'll have that old man's money, my dear, every sixpence," says Mrs. Stormont, emphatically.

"Then your Fred ought to have her."

"Why, you see, my dear, these Faunthorpes are people of no family."

"You mean that he has asked her and been refused," remarks Mrs. Groshen, astutely.

"I don't think a Stormont is likely to find himself rejected by a parish doctor's niece," replies the colonel's wife, with suppressed indignation. "As to Mr. Trenchard's fortune, it is nothing to boast of after all. It has all come from trade."

This is a thrust at the banking business.

"I fancy that is the source of most people's money now-a-days," returns Mrs. Groshen, blandly. "Professional men seldom seem to have much."

Hereupon the two ladies, having indulged in a few friendly passes on their own account, return to the slaughter of the absent, and kiss each other affectionately at parting.

Sibyl's dissipations are therefore, by her own desire, confined to those festivities to which Mr. Trenchard is bidden, and which take the dignified and substantive form of dinners. No one could think of inviting the master of Lancaster Lodge to "come in" in the evening. Dinners of first quality, A1 at Lloyds, are those to which Mr. Trenchard is bidden, and very splendid are the banquets with which at longish intervals he gratifies his friends in return. Wonderful is the regard which Redcastle has for Mr. Trenchard, and its eagerness to win and retain his friendship. It is not to be supposed that the *élite* nave any expectation of profiting in a direct manner by his wealth. They have none. But they like to adorn their table with a rich man. They like to put him forward as one of their best friends, and to know that less privileged people are smitten with envy. They invite him very much for the same reason that they buy costly fruit out of season, and waxen blossoms from the hothouse instead of homely roses ripened in the sun. He reflects honour and glory upon themselves. It is a distinction to be on intimate terms with so much money. Mr. Trenchard's Redcastle friends brag about his wealth as if it were their own, smack their lips as they tell each other his income, and that he has never less than fifty thousand at call, in case some sudden opportunity for a stroke of business should crop up in Calcutta. Has Stephen Trenchard told his new friends the amount of his income, or the sum he keeps uninvested? Hardly, for he is the most reticent of men as to his own affairs. But Redcastle has a knack of evolving facts about other people's business out of its inner consciousness.

A year has slipped away, unawares almost it seems to Sibyl, despite lurking pangs of remorse, silent hours given to regret. Life at Lancaster Lodge is such an easy thing. It is so pleasant to have everything one desires, to be praised and petted, and invited here, there, and everywhere, and to refuse the most flattering invitations upon the last fashionable absurdity in note-paper. Pleasant, in a word, to be Miss Faunthorpe of

Lancaster Lodge, instead of Miss Faunthorpe of nowhere. There is something of the lotus-eater's dreamy idlesse assuredly in this reposeful existence at Lancaster Lodge.

Conscience has been lapped to sleep before the year is out, and Sibyl has persuaded herself that Alexis Secretan has carved his way to independence somehow or other, and is getting on very well indeed in some distant quarter of the globe, whence he will doubtless return by some happy conjuncture of events soon after uncle Trenchard's death, which calamity in the course of nature will come to pass in a few years.

"And then we shall both be amply rewarded for the sacrifice we have made in this separation," muses Sibyl, as if the separation had been a voluntary one on her husband's side as well as her own.

Mr. Trenchard takes life tolerably easily considering that he has his own way in everything, an indulgence which acts as an irritant upon some dispositions. He is feared and obeyed in his own house, flattered and caressed out of it. His servants work for him as no other man's servants work, and obey, and tremble at his footstep. He accepts all that Redcastle can give him, dines out a good deal among the *élite*, tells his prosy old Indian stories again and again, to listeners who always laugh in the right places. He enjoys the homage offered to his wealth, and chuckles over the weakness of his flatterers as he drives home with his niece.

"If my name were in the *Gazette* next Wednesday morning, before Wednesday night I should be friendless," he says; "and the people we have dined with this evening would be gloating over my downfall."

"Oh, uncle! they would be sorry, surely," exclaims Sibyl, more for the sake of conversation than from any belief in the good-heartedness of her friends.

"Sorry that they had been taken in—that they had mistaken a poor man for a rich one, no doubt; but for me, not a whit. Society in a place like Redcastle is made up on the co-operative system—is a club to which a man is admitted upon certain understood conditions. The first of these is that he should be well off."

"Luckily you are never likely to put our friends to the test," says Sibyl.

"Of course not. And in the meanwhile there's no harm in calling them friends. One name does as well as another when you are talking of unrealities."

The year has gone, and Marion has not been asked to stay with her uncle Trenchard—a fact which she resents bitterly, and ascribes to double-dealing on the part of Sibyl. She has been at Lancaster Lodge tolerably often, but only as Sibyl's visitor, and although she accepts all Sibyl's invitations, it is almost unbearable to be invited and patronized by a sister. Sibyl has established herself as Mr. Trenchard's adopted daughter. He coolly declares that she suits him better than Marion, and that she is to keep his house till she marries.

"I suppose I must have made myself very disagreeable to him in the three months I spent here," remarks Marion one bright April afternoon digging her croquet ball into the ground with misused energy. She has come to spend the afternoon with Sibyl.

"No, dear, I don't think it was so bad as that," replies Sibyl, graciously; "but you didn't succeed in making yourself agreeable to him."

"I know I made myself a perfect slave," complains the injured Marion; "toasting his newspapers, and running for his slippers, and peeling walnuts for him till my fingers were black. I'm sure I don't know what he wants—the nasty old thing!"

"Now really, Marion, I can't consent to hear the best of uncles called names,—on his own croquet lawn, too."

"Very much the best of uncles for you, but give me uncle Robert."

"Well, my dear, you've got him. Haven't I left you in undisturbed possession of our paternal uncle?"

"All I can say is that it is positive injustice," murmurs Marion, as the game proceeds.

Frederick Stormont strolls in five minutes afterwards and takes a mallet, whereupon the sisters become all smiles and graciousness. He goes in to afternoon tea with them, and they sit on the crimson brocade sofas sipping orange pekoe out of Indian tea-cups, waited on by the most accomplished of footmen, and discussing the petty gossip of Above and Below Bar. An empty life assuredly. But it is pleasant to sit in a handsome room, almost an indoor garden in its abundance of choicest flowers, a sunlit lawn beyond the open windows; pleasant to be dressed in the last fashion; pleasant to be admired, even though the eyes of the admirer are pale in hue and porcine in shape; pleasant to feel that in life's eager race one has shot ever so far ahead of one's younger sister. So, at least, feels Sibyl as she accepts Mr. Stormont's vapid homage, and allows Marion to be useful as her foil.

Mrs. Groshen is strictly incorrect in her conjecture about this young man's wooing. Frederick has not been rejected by Mr. Trenchard's niece. He has not yet ventured to propose to her, and when pushed hard upon the subject by his father, he always asks for time.

"I think she likes me," he says complacently, "but, by Jove, you know it doesn't do for a man to hurry that kind of thing;

you're so impatient, you see, you want a fellow to round the Cape before he's got across the Bay of Biscay. Miss Faunthorpe has a good deal of reserve about her and that kind of thing, and she's just the sort of girl to throw over a fellow who proposed to her before she'd quite made up her mind about liking him."

"She's a long time making up her mind about you," replies the colonel, pensively. "And upon my word, you know, Fred, if you don't marry a woman with money you'll have to do something for yourself. Things can't go on like this much longer. By Jove, you know, you'll have to emigrate. I don't see that there's anything you could do in England. You're too old for the army, or the navy, or the civil service; you'll have to try the colonies."

"I might do something, kangaroo-shooting in New Zealand," says Frederick, meditatively.

"Hang it, sir! a man can't get his livin' kangaroo-shootin'," roars the colonel. "You'd better marry Trenchard's niece."

"She's a very jolly girl," says Fred, vaguely. He would have called Electra or Antigone, Joan of Arc or Mary Stuart, jolly. He knows no higher praise to bestow on the woman of his choice.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAKING READY FOR VICTORY.

The fair spring days flit by; the violets and primroses, bluebells and wind-flowers, fade in the copses, unseen, unknown, uncared for, save by a few peasant children; the white blossoms of the pears—the pinky bloom of the apples—have drifted away on the light west winds like summer snow; ferns uncurl their tender fronds in thicket and lane, and stand up to hail the summer. The cuckoo's last call dies in the silence of the wood, the skylark's clear carol rings out above the tall green corn. Summer has come—summer has come—and the little children of Redcastle—the children of the commonality, at least—wander far afield under the mid-day sun, and lose themselves in distant woods, and drain the cup of summer joys to the dregs. The children of the *élite* regard summer as a period in which they wear starched frocks, find French and German grammar more than usually oppressive, and entertain hopes of going to the sea-side.

Sibyl welcomes June and the roses with a languid greeting. That smooth, easy life has begun to pall a little on Stephen

Trenchard's niece. Despite its pleasantness, it is at best a monotonous existence, and youth's eager spirit revolts against monotony. Not willingly would Sibyl confess even to herself that she is tired of Lancaster Lodge and Redcastle dinner parties, Redcastle compliments, Redcastle life altogether.

She wishes that her uncle would extend the circle of his acquaintance, yet is obliged to admit that it would not be easy for him to do so at Redcastle. The county people have not called upon Mr. Trenchard. Aloof in their fastnesses among the hills and moors, the county people refuse to bow to the golden calf, hug themselves in their social privileges, and do not recognise the fact of an old gentleman having made money in India as a reason why they should go out of the beaten track to take notice of him. From their lofty region of territorial estate they look down with an equal disdain upon professional and commercial people who live in a town and call five acres of garden and paddock *land*. Stephen Trenchard's million is nothing to them, or if they think of his wealth at all, it is with resentment, as a sign of the times, and an irrefutable proof that England is going to the dogs.

Perhaps it is the very fact of the county people's exclusiveness which makes Sibyl regard them with a certain amount of interest. Those big broad-shouldered young men she has seen ride past her window in the hunting season, sitting their horses much more easily than Frederick Stormont sits his chair, glorious in "pink" and buckskins, loud voiced, large whiskered, seem to her of a different race from young Grosmen, or young Stormont, or Dr. Mitsand's pale-faced spectacled son, whose manly vigour has degenerated into brains, Mr. Twells the curate, or Mr. Jewson the lawyer. To her fancy there is something grand about these sons of the soil, a rough nobility, an outspoken contempt for the petty conventionalities which constitute the small despotism of Redcastle society. *Cæsar est supra grammaticam.* The county people are above good manners—that is to say, good manners as understood in Redcastle.

The town and the county meet occasionally in the hunting-field, where the county looks on with a smile at some of the town's feats in horsemanship, leaves the town three fields behind for the most part, and now and then deposits the town in ditches or hangs it out to dry on a stiff bullfinch.

Twice in every year town and county meet on equal ground. Redcastle, small and obscure as it is in the eyes of the outer world, boasts a racecourse, and as pretty a course in a small way as any in England. Less than a mile out of the town, on that broad open common known as Redcastle Woods, gleam the white posts of the course, and the white walls of the stand, a permanent and substantial building. Redcastle has its spring and summer meeting, two days on each occasion—and just the merriest two days in that part of the world. Granted that horses of much weight or *prestige* rarely appear at Redcastle; the fact only leaves the ground open to the horses of the local aristocracy, and makes the races so much the more interesting to Redcastle itself.

Sibyl has never seen a race in her life, and it was not without a struggle that she declined Mrs. Stormont's invitation to join her party at the spring meeting. Now comes the summer meeting, and another invitation from the leader of Redcastle society.

"Rose and Violet," the dear girls are named after those favourite flowers—five feet ten each of them, and with the complexions of cookmaids;—"Rose and Violet will be so disappointed if you refuse to join our party, my dear Sibyl. Of course I say nothing of Fred's feelings."

"Why don't you go with them, child?" asks Mr. Trenchard, when Sibyl reads him the letter, laughing as she reads.

"I don't care for pleasures that you cannot share, uncle."

"Nonsense, my dear! I could share this if I liked. For my part, I could never understand what people could see in a race, unless as a hazardous investment with the possibility of enormous returns. I can fancy a bookman enjoying the races in a businesslike way; but for people to sit in their carriages to look on at other people winning or losing, and call it pleasure, that passes my comprehension."

"I should like to see a race for once in my life," says Sibyl, languishing for any novel sensation that may ruffle the mill-pond of her existence.

"Then write and accept Mrs. Stormont's invitation, my dear."

"You won't think me unkind for going without you?"

"I should think you much more unkind if you wanted me to go with you."

So it is settled. Sibyl tells her dear Mrs. Stormont that she is charmed to accept her kind invitation, and summons Miss Eylett to immediate counsel. She has ever so many pretty dresses in her wardrobe, but she must have something new for this occasion, with a view to crushing dear Violet and Rose by the exhibition of a dress they have never seen before. The invitation has been given a week before the races, so there is time for preparation. The council is a solemn one, and by the intensity of Sibyl's desire to look her best may be measured her hatred of dear Rose and Violet.

"Now mind, Miss Eylett," she begins, after she has looked through *Le Follet* and pronounced all the illustrations "hideous," I must have nothing that can possibly look like a shopkeeper's wife's Sunday gown—no flaming pink or blue that people can see a mile off——"

"Mauve, or a rich voylet, now," suggests Miss Eylett, in her persuasive voice.

"My dear Eylett, mauve and violet are the colours vulgar people choose when they want to be genteel."

"A sweet French grey."

"Give me a housemaid's afternoon gown at once."

"A cinnamon brown."

"A doctor's wife's dinner dress. No, I must have some pale indistinct colour softened with a cloud of India muslin. A dress which looks nothing particular at a distance, but which is fit for a princess when you come to look into it. Mr. Trenchard gave me an embroidered Indian muslin, which will be just the thing, over a pale maize corded silk,—you know the shade I mean, straw-colour shot with apricot."

Sibyl opens a huge camphor chest, in which she keeps her treasures, and displays a muslin dress fine as a cobweb, and covered with embroidery.

"Exquisite!" exclaims Miss Eylett; "what taste you have, Miss Faunthorpe!"

She would have been just as enthusiastic had Sibyl suggested pickled-cabbage colour, picked out with pea-green.

"And you must make me a bonnet exactly to match the dress."

"Of course, Miss Faunthorpe. I'll go round to Carmichael's at once, and see if they've got the colour; and if they haven't I'll take the three o'clock train to Krampston."

This question settled, Sibyl feels easy in her mind, and looks forward to next week with pleasure. The summer is at its height—mid July—and a delicious July, warm, dry, ripening roses and ripening corn, swelling the peaches on the wall, and reddening the apples in the orchard—all the land basking in the sun, and Redcastle High Street a place to look at blinkingly between two and five in the afternoon, and a burning ploughshare to walk upon. Marion and Jenny come toiling along the sun-baked pavement in the very hottest hour of the afternoon to visit their prosperous sister,—Jane splendid in the peach-coloured silk and new boots, and a hat that is too small for her large round head, with its thick brown hair in curls that no application of the hair-brush will reduce from their disorder to the smoothness of civilization.

Sibyl receives her sisters languidly, under the plane-trees, exhausted by her interview with Miss Eylett. Marion's temper is not improved by the warm walk, or by the labour of getting Jenny up in a style befitting Lancaster Lodge.

"There never was such a troublesome child," she complains as she sinks into a rustic arm-chair, conscious that her face is the colour of a boiled lobster, while Sibyl, in cream-coloured Indian silk, and a turquoise blue sash, is looking divinely pale. "Look at her legs. She has grown out of that frock already; and as r ever keeping her decently dressed, I defy you. There's the int of a slice of bread and butter on the front breadth, and ears of marmalade all over the sleeves, though she's only worn e frock on Sundays."

"Let her wear it every day and wear it out," says Sibyl, nerously; she shall have another for best."

"Oh, you dear!" cries Jenny; "but if you knew what a life arion leads me when I've a good frock on you might think it a eater charity never to give me one."

"You ungrateful minx," exclaims Marion, "didn't I stand half hour this broiling afternoon doing your hair?"

"Pulling it, you mean," responds Jenny. "If you'd combed with a hay-fork and brushed it with a bush harrow you couldn't ive hurt me more."

"There's gratitude!" ejaculates Marion, pointing to the offender.

"*My* idea of gratitude is thankfulness for things we want," asons Jenny, who is good at argument. "I didn't want my ir pulled."

"Well, Sibyl," says Marion, "is uncle Trenchard going to the ces?"

Everybody thinks and talks of the races at this time. It is the e subject of conversation in Redcastle. A rare thing for Redstle to have so much as one subject of conversation; as a rule, e town contrives to be conversational about nothing.

"No, uncle Trenchard hates races. I am going with the Storonts."

"Indeed! I thought you wouldn't go anywhere without your icle."

"No more I would in an ordinary way, but I felt a kind of inrest in the races. One hears so much of them."

"I feel a kind of interest in them too," says Marion, with an jured air. "I've been hearing about Redcastle races ever since left school, and yet, living so near, I've never seen them. Uncle obert has got a pony that would take us, but he has not got the irit. You might have asked uncle Trenchard to let you take us l in his barouche. I dare say uncle Robert would have gone if ou'd taken him."

Sibyl looks doubtful as to the delight of such a family party.

"I've accepted Mrs. Stormont's invitation, you see," she replies, ologetically.

"Oh yes, of course, catch you putting yourself out of the way anybody! Another girl in your position might have thought her poor relations. What are you going to wear?"

Sibyl describes the costume which she and Miss Eylett have ranged that morning. Poor Marion listens in an agony of envy.

"What a lot of money uncle Trenchard must give you!" she claims.

"No, he doesn't give me much, but he allows me to keep an account at Carmichael's."

"Well," sighs Marion, "I would give a year of my life to go to the races this day week."

"What a pity our lives are not transferable like railway stock," says Sibyl, airily. She is not deeply moved by Marion's piteous condition. Her mind is occupied with a prophetic vision of her triumphs next Wednesday. She will see and be seen by the county. That idea is more inspiring than the prospect of a day spent with the Stormonts, whom she knows by heart, or even the privilege of beholding Mrs. Groshen's raiment, which is sure to be resplendent and of the very latest fashion, however hideous in the abstract and individually unbecoming that fashion may be.

CHAPTER XV.

TOWN AND COUNTY.

A CURIOUS thing happens that evening after dinner. It is Mr. Trenchard's habit to read the daily papers at his ease in the drawing-room as soon as he has withdrawn from the dinner-table; or, if he is idly disposed, Sibyl reads to him, and beguiles him into placid slumber. This evening he reads the papers for himself, beginning, as usual, with the *Times*, which he studies profoundly. He sits in his easy chair by one open window. Sibyl yawns over a novel at another. Rather dreary these summer evenings at Lancaster Lodge, when twilight's purple shadows rise ghost-like among the trees on the lawn, and the gates are closed upon the outer world. Welcome even such commonplace interruption as the advent of Frederick Stormont, and an adjournment to the billiard-room.

Sibyl looks up from her book with a start at a sudden movement of her uncle's. What was that half-stifled exclamation which sounded so like an oath? Stephen Trenchard is standing up, with the paper crumpled in his right hand, staring blankly at his niece. She goes to him, looks at him in frightened interrogation; but he neither sees nor hears her. Is this some kind of seizure,—epileptic, paralytic? She thinks so, tremblingly, for a moment, before Mr. Trenchard's keen black eyes assume their power of vision and look into hers.

"Dearest uncle, what is the matter?"

"Nothing that need concern you, Sibyl. A friend, an old friend of mine, dead in India. The announcement of his death shocked me, that's all. I ought not to have been surprised. At my age a man must expect old friends to drop off. Go back to your book, my dear. There is no reason for you to be agitated."

Sibyl looks wonderingly at the paper in her uncle's hand. It is not the supplement. That, with its births, marriages, and leaths, lies on the carpet unopened. She remembers that the leaths of distinguished people are sometimes recorded in the oody of the paper, and this friend of her uncle's is doubtless a erson worthy of an obituary paragraph.

"I am so sorry," she says sympathetically.

"So am I. But it was to be expected. Go back to your book, hild."

Perceiving that sympathy is not required, Sibyl returns to her eat by the distant window. Marion would have hung about her ncle for a quarter of an hour bemoaning his loss and offering tale crumbs of consolation.

Sibyl hears the door shut ten minutes afterwards, and looking p. sees that Stephen Trenchard has vanished. She hastens to ook for the newspapers, eager to find out all she can about her ncle's departed friend; but Mr. Trenchard has taken the papers ith him, and when she searches for them next day in his study nd in other likely places, they are not to be found. Nor does Mr. renchard reappear that evening. The butler brings Sibyl a essage at tea-time to the effect that his master has letters to rite, and will take tea in his study. So that particular infusion f hyson with which Mr. Trenchard is in the habit of irritating is nerves is carried to the study on a salver, an Sibyl is left to pend her evening alone.

There are times, on just such an evening as this, when memory ecalls that one room in Dixon Street, Chelsea, and his company hose easy temper and natural gaiety of heart could brighten eepest poverty with an occasional ray of light.

"If I could have borne poverty as well as he, we might have ruggled on together to the end," she thinks, with a touch of morse. "But then what a pity it would have been to lose uncle renchard's fortune! How ghastly pale he looked to-night, poor ear man!"

Mr. Trenchard seems a little out of sorts for the next few ys, not quite so keen and far-seeing, so exacting or high-nded in his household as it is his wont to be. He has a eoccupied air, a thoughtful look, and is evidently much con-rned by the loss of that departed friend whose name he has t mentioned.

Sibyl wonders at this a little, never having heard Mr. Trenchard lk of any intimate friend in India. He has told numerous stories Calcutta society, of trade and chicanery in that palatial city; t of friendship, of intimate congenial companions, he has not eathed a word. Nor in the year and a half of his residence at

Redcastle has a single Anglo-Indian acquaintance visited him. Impossible to imagine a man more independent of friendship, yet he seems cut to the quick by the death of this distant friend, and is slow to recover his equanimity.

Mrs. Stormont calls about three days before the races, and finds Mr. Trenchard and his niece on the lawn, the gentleman asleep or meditating, his countenance shrouded by an orange-coloured bandanna, like a new veiled prophet, the lady working point lace at a stitch a minute.

The kind soul has come to talk about the races.

"I wish you could be induced to join us, dear Mr. Trenchard."

"You're very good, my dear madam, but the thing is not in my way. I hardly know whether a horse should have four legs or six. If you were to show me a six-legged animal I doubt if I should remark the redundancy."

"And yet you have the finest carriage-horses in Redcastle."

"Because I did not choose them myself, madam."

"I shall call for you at half-past twelve, my dear," says Mrs. Stormont, turning to Sibyl. "Fred is going to ride. I shall hire Shrub's landau and pair. My poor dear ponies would be frightened to death on a racecourse."

Shrub is the proprietor of the George Hotel and livery stables, and has the honour of ministering to the *élite* on all state occasions.

"Why hire Shrub's landau when my barouche is at your service?" asks Mr. Trenchard. "I shall be glad to give that idle coachman of mine a day's work."

"My dear Mr. Trenchard, you are too kind. Such an idea never entered my head."

"Odd if it didn't," thinks Sibyl, "when you are always making use of the carriage in some way or other."

The Stormonts have allowed Sibyl to drive them a good deal during the last few months, to the infinite relief of the ponies and the buck-basket, both of which institutions are slightly the worse for wear. You may get fifteen years' good work out of a pony, but when he approaches his majority his powers are apt to wane.

Mrs. Stormont allows herself to be entreated, and finally yields gracefully, and with an airy coquetry, but only on condition that Mr. Trenchard shall dine with them on the race day. This he promises, with certain reservations.

"If I feel myself up to the mark, I'll come," he says, "but I have not been particularly well lately."

"Uncle Trenchard has lost an old friend in India," explains Sibyl, and seeing her uncle's impatient frown, is sorry she has made the remark.

"Indeed!" exclaims Mrs. Stormont, thirsting for information.

"In the civil service or the army? The colonel has so many old Indian friends."

"My friend was neither in the civil service nor the army," says Mr. Trenchard, and says no more.

Mrs. Stormont is disappointed, but she has got the carriage, which was the object of her visit, so she drifts off into the usual Redcastle talk. "Have you seen the Groshens lately?" and "Did you hear that Dr. Vitsund has been very ill?" and so on; vith which interesting discourse she beguiles the next half-hour.

The race day comes with the calendar, and a glorious day, hot lue sky, roads white with dust, grass brown and slippery, bad for he horses, opine the learned in such matters. The grand stand is gleaming in the sun, flags are flying, the town is all astir, flies re driving to and fro between station and racecourse, with visiors from Krampston, people who smell of commerce and dockard, oakum and tar, a rough lot in the estimation of genteel Redcastle. At half-past twelve the Trenchard barouche calls for Mrs. Stormont and her two daughters; Sibyl has taken her place n it already. She wishes to sit with her back to the horses, but his Mrs. Stormont will not allow, and after a little polite kirmishing she takes her place next that lady, the Miss tormonts side by side on the opposite seat, which they fill to verflowing. On the way to the course the ladies have time for silent review of each other's apparel. Rose and Violet are in ashed muslins and home-made bonnets. Mrs. Stormont wears er dove-coloured moire, which is an institution in Redcastle, nd as well known as the town clock.

"Here comes Mrs. Groshen's carriage. I suppose she is going crush us with some new finery," says Rose, with a venomous ok at the maize silk and India muslin.

"I hope it will be in a little better taste than usual," remarks iolet, who is of a more calculating temper than her sister. What lovely embroidery that is of yours, Sibyl! I can't help oticing it."

Frederick joins the party presently, on a brute of a gray horse, hose ownership he participates with young Jewson, the lawyer's n. The joint animal, having very little mouth to speak of at e best, and being ridden on opposite principles by his two proietors, is about as manageable as a watering-place donkey. ank Jewson, who is the better equestrian of the co-owners, asts that he rides with his knees. Fred Stormont hangs on by e reins, and makes the wretched quadruped's mouth his fulcrum. e is not happy on horseback himself, or the cause of happiness his steed, and the joint proprietorship is an extravagance which can ill afford. But he feels that the horse gives him social tus, and endures bravely. The beast is consistent, and starting th a fixed idea that the sooner he gets back to his stables the better for his own well-being, tugs desperately at every turning in the endeavour to make a short cut home, and if confronted in his straight course with any object which he dislikes, wheels sharp round, and sets off at a lively trot stable-wards. The first half-hour of Mr. Stormont's ride is one prolonged tussle with the gray, which, in the pride of their hearts, the joint proprietors have christened Flying Dutchman.

"The Dutchman is awfully fresh to-day, Fred," remonstrates Rose, when the gray has backed into the landau half a dozen times, in his efforts to go up every side street or alley; "hadn't you better try him on the curb?"

"I think I am riding him on the curb," says Fred, looking doubtfully at his reins, which are in an inextricable muddle, "the fact is Jewson spoils his mouth. Yah, you beast, what's the matter now?" as the Dutchman, taking objection to a very small child in a white pinafore, gathers all his legs together, collapses, and scrambles frantically across the street, with a noise as of a detachment of cavalry.

"Is that a fit?" asks Sibyl, when Mr. Trenchard's horses have recovered from their consternation at this manœuvre.

"No, it's only a shy. He cannot stand a perambulator."

"Nor a woman in a red cloak, nor a baker's cart, nor a washing-basket, nor a chimney sweep, nor a heap of stones, nor an organ," says Rose, indignantly; "I never knew such a beast. He'll have your life some day, Fred, I feel convinced."

"He's more than half thoroughbred," says Frederick, leaning over to pat the animal's neck—an attention which the Dutchman resents by a sudden slouch forward, and a furious shake of his head, whereby he all but precipitates Fred upon the paving stones.

"Are you fond of riding?" asks Sibyl, as the horseman pulls himself together, scarlet after his struggles with his steed, and settles into a jolting trot beside the barouche.

"P—p—passion—ate—ly," says Fred, the syllables jerked out of him piecemeal by the gray.

"But that seems rather an uncomfortable horse to ride."

"He's a little fidgety in the town, but he's splendid when you get him on the turf. You should see him in a stretching gallop across the grass."

"Mr. Stormont omits to state that in these stretching gallops he is entirely at the Dutchman's mercy, and suffers abject terror.

They turn out of the Market-place presently, into a broad lane leading to the woods—a lane in which there are nice old houses on one side, and orchards on the other, and at the top of this lane they come out upon that open stretch of greensward, with a hollow full of hazel bushes, hawthorn, and blackberry re and there, which is dignified with the name of Redcastle oods.

Yonder towers the stand, white in the sunshine, flags blue, red, d yellow, fluttering gaily, the oval course on the southern side a slope, and a fringe of carriages and smartly dressed people a simple rustic racecourse, with its local gentry, and sprinkling citizens from busy Krampston.

The Stormont barouche takes its position among the great es of the land, and by good luck finds itself in the very lap of county. The magnates of Redcastle are six carriages off, s. Groshen becking and nodding at her friends, gorgeously ayed in a brilliant mauve silk, which glistens in the sun, and onnet with feathers.

There are many greetings between Mrs. Stormont and her ghbours—for the Stormonts occupy the border line of Redtle society, and are graciously regarded by the county families. nd "how d'ye do's" are uttered by the occupants of a tall ch next door to the barouche, two young men and two young nen are seated on the box—the men in homespun tweed, the nen in brown holland and brown straw hats. Two grooms in green, and mahogany tops, are in attendance.

Are we going to have some good racing, Sir Wilford?" asks . Stormont, radiant at finding herself in such good company, Mrs. Groshen afar off like Dives. The bigger of the gray answers in a loud good natured voice, dropping lightly down n his perch, and coming close to the barouche.

Not much fun, I'm afraid; wretched lot of leather platers. ng to speculate, Miss Stormont? Better put something on heen for the Cup. Sure to win."

e addresses himself to the fair Rose, shaking hands with her while, but he looks at Sibyl. That delicate clear-cut face, its brown eyes, is strange to him, and in a place where ybody knows everybody else that is enough to awaken in-st.

byl remembers him as one of the hunters she has seen ride the walls of Lancaster Lodge, clad in weather-stained et.

e is tall—six feet two—broad shouldered, with the frame of hlete. He has shaggy brown hair, shaggy brown moustache, -humoured gray eyes, a common-place nose, a good, firm h, and strong square chin, large hands in well-worn tan es.

ir Wilford Cardonnel, Miss Faunthorpe," say Mrs. Stormont, ously.

Wilford takes off his hat and looks pleased, but is little than before. This name of Faunthorpe means nothing for

"Fond of racing?" he inquires, following up the introduction.

"This is the first time I was ever at a race," replies Sibyl. "But I think I shall enjoy it very much."

"Then you don't belong to this part of the country, I suppose? We Yorkshire folks are always going to races."

"Yes, I have lived in Redcastle ever since—or almost ever since, I left school."

"And have never come to the races?"

"I couldn't get anybody to bring me," replies Sibyl, frankly. "Neither of my uncles care about races. Good gracious!"

This exclamation is evoked by a most startling apparition on the other side of the course, exactly opposite the barouche. A shabby old pony carriage, quite the most ancient vehicle of its kind in Redcastle, a dilapidated, unkempt pony, with his nose in a nose-bag, an elderly gentleman in a discoloured white hat, a young woman in pink muslin, and a girl of nondescript appearance, in short petticoats, standing on the back seat of the pony carriage, in order the better to survey the brilliant scene, and making a positively awful exhibition of her legs.

These are uncle Robert, Marion, and Jenny. Sibyl beholds them with unmitigated consternation. She will be obliged to acknowledge them presently, to avow her relationship to that wretched chaise, that odious pony, in the face of the county families, nay, the highest and mightiest of the high and mighty—the Cardonnels of the How, people she has heard the Stormonts talk about with as much reverence as if they had the prosperity of the county in their keeping, wound up the sun like a clock, and turned on the rain from a tap in their custody.

"This is Marion's doings," thinks Sibyl, indignantly. "That girl is capable of anything. To think that they must needs come and perch themselves exactly opposite us!"

There seems deliberate malice in the act. A few minutes ago there was only empty space where the pony-chaise stands now. The chaise has been placed there since the arrival of the barouche.

Dr. Faunthorpe surveys his niece's party mildly through his spectacles; Marion nods and kisses her hand; but Sibyl, once having seen her danger, looks every way except towards the doctor's chaise. Jenny, more energetic than her elders, is not to be baffled. Finding nods and hand-kissing unnoticed, she raises her shrill young voice, and screams, "Sibyl, Sibyl! Look this way, Sibyl."

"Who is that leggy child calling?" asks Sir Wilford, looking at Jenny through his race-glass, which brings her to the end of his nose. "What an excitable young person! And what a funny party! A little old man in spectacles and a white hat, a tall young woman with ginger hair, and that leggy child dancing about upon the cushions. And what a pony! The very one Noah had in the ark, I should think."

Sibyl grows crimson. Can she acknowledge her kith and kin after this? While she hesitates, Mrs. Stormont raises her gold-rimmed binoculars, and scrutinizes the opposite party.

"Why, my dear," she exclaims, not sorry to set off any obligation involved in the loan of the barouche by the humiliation of its owner, "it's that dear, good little man, Dr. Faunthorpe, and your sisters. I wonder you didn't recognise the pony; there's not another like him in Redcastle."

"Is that little girl your sister?" says Sir Wilford. "I beg your pardon and hers if I said anything impertinent. She seems a fine high-spirited girl, but in an awful state of excitement. Shall I bring her across to you? She wants to speak to you, I fancy."

"Oh, pray leave her where she is," replies Sibyl. "She's a dreadful nuisance. There, there, child," nodding to the obnoxious hoyden; "won't that do?"

Jane kisses her hand again vehemently, and having succeeded in attracting her sister's attention, seems tolerably resigned.

Sibyl feels that her maize-coloured silk and India muslin, the barouche, and all things are a failure after this. And there are the Miss Cardonnels in their plain holland gowns, with satchels at their waists, brown hats, brown feathers, brown holland umbrellas—singularly plain attire, which looks in better form for a racecourse than Sibyl's flower-show costume.

Sir Wilford stands by the barouche for an hour or more, and ells Sibyl all about the horses. He devotes himself to her almost exclusively before the face of Redcastle. Fred Stormont, bounding restlessly about upon the gray, and bringing that excited animal to anchor beside the barouche, when he can, feels hat he is nowhere, and begins to think that he has erred on the ide of caution and hesitancy in his wooing of Stephen Trenchard's niece.

The races may not be good races from a professional point of iew,—the horses may be the very refuse of famous stables, but he excitement and exhilaration of the crowd are not lessened by hat fact. No weighty stakes are lost or won, but every one seems happy. Broad grins are the only wear. There is a great deal of picnicking between the races, and people who would have lived through the day at home on a biscuit and a glass of herry, do wild things in the consumption of lobster salad, chicken, mayonnaise, and pigeon pie.

Mrs. Stormont has provided the most refined of baskets,—delicate papers of anchovy and chicken sandwiches, fragile scuits, some choice fruit, and a bottle of dry sherry. These favours she dispenses to her party, while Sir Wilford and his people are devouring their lobster salad on the roof of the drag, enlivened by a running fire of champagne corks.

Fred, roving to and fro on the gray, declines the maternal sherry.

"No thanks, mother; when I'm dry myself I don't want my wine dry. I'll go and do a bitter at the stand presently.

Sibyl has gradually recovered that death-blow of the pony carriage. Sir Wilford Cardonnel's attentions have put her in a good humour. It is as if some prince of the blood-royal had paid her homage in the presence of his subjects, and she knows that Mrs. Groshen and Mrs. Merlin Spyke, the Miss Jewsons, and above all dearest Rose and Violet, will be provoked to envy by the distinction thus conferred upon her. Indeed, dear Rose's brow has a cloudy look already, and Violet is snappish. Only Mrs. Stormont preserves her equanimity, and smiles upon the baronet when he re-descends from the drag and takes up his position beside the barouche.

Sibyl's ignorance of racing matters is curiously attractive to him from its novelty, his sisters being learned in the minutest details of the turf, and as well up in stable talk as their brother's stud groom, under whom they have graduated. He lingers by her side till the races are nearly over, and his grooms go to fetch the horses. The important duty of seeing these animals put to distracts him a little, but he comes back again at the last to say good-bye to Mrs. Stormont and her daughters and to Sibyl.

"I should like you to know my sisters," he says, "I am sure you'd suit each other,"—a mendacious assertion inspired by the exigencies of the situation, Sir Wilford knowing very well that town and county have seldom an idea in common. He has not ventured to bring about an introduction on the course, his sisters being at an inconvenient altitude, and of an uncertain temper. But he feels that he must contrive to see more of Miss Faunthorpe somehow or other. Who can she be? She is too richly dressed for a governess, and the Stormonts are too civil to her. Yet she must be a nobody, or Mrs. Stormont would have taken care to parade her people. He resolves to call on the Stormonts in a day or two, and find out all about their *protegée*; and sustained by this resolution, he takes his reluctant leave. How splendid his coach looks to Sibyl! the four broad-chested bays, with their honest English-looking heads, horses that mean work, the steel chains, the black harness, austerely simple in its mounting, the grooms in Lincoln green, the two girls in brown holland nodding good-bye to the Stormonts as Sir Wilford drives away, making a wide sweep upon the turf, his horses going as if this was the happiest moment of their lives, his grooms climbing into their laces after the team has started, with some hazard of life and imb, but with honour to themselves.

"Charming man, Sir Wilford Cardonnel," says Mrs. Stormont. The Cardonnels are one of the oldest of our county families. Iow do you like him, Sibyl?"

"He seems good-natured," replies Sibyl, carelessly. What are ie Cardonnels to her? and what avails this young man's admira- on, save to flaunt in the face of her acquaintance? *Her* name s written in the Book of Fate, and in the registers of St. pollonius, Pimlico.

"The soul of good nature. His sisters are charming too; great iends of Rose and Violet's'"

"Uncommon intimate," says Fred, who has dragged that nyielding gray up to the carriage once more. "They see one nother twice a year, I should think. For my part, I detest the unty people. They're a parcel of narrow-minded snobs, who ink the beginning and end of life is to ride straight to ounds."

Having relieved his jealous pangs by this vindictive burst, red goes to look after Mr. Trenchard's horses, and presently e barouche falls in with the line of vehicles driving towards e town, Fred and the gray in attendance, that animal suddenly nenable to reason now that he is going back to his stable.

Sibyl drives home with the Stormonts, with whom she is to ne.

"I do hope your dear uncle will join us at dinner," says Mrs. ormont.

That hope is nipped in the bud, for among the day's letters s. Stormont finds a note from Stephen Trenchard :—

"DEAR MRS. STORMONT,

"I do not feel well enough to avail myself of your kind itation for this evening, so must ask you to excuse me. I will d the carriage for Sibyl at half-past ten.

"Yours very truly,

"STEPHEN TRENCHARD."

I'm afraid your uncle is breaking up, my dear," remarks Mrs. mont with a sigh. "I saw a change in him when I called other day."

That is strange," says Sibyl, "for he has not been actually ill. has not kept his room for a single day."

He is a man of iron nerves, my love, and would be reluctant ive way to illness, but I feel sure that he is declining. At ge, and after a life in India, you cannot expect to have him you many years."

byl looks grave. No, she has not counted on her uncle g many years, or at least when she deserted her husband she told herself that the old man's life could be but brief, and that a few years of patience would be rewarded by fortune and independence for all her life to come. But since she has lived with uncle Trenchard she has been inclined to think differently. In his wiry frame and active habits, his temperance, his iron nerves, there seems the promise of life prolonged to its utmost limits. He may live to be ninety, and she be almost an old woman ere she reap the wages of her toil; and in that case what is to become of Alexis?

Mrs. Stormont's remark inspires a new hope. The end may not be so far off after all. She is not ungrateful to her uncle, she is not without some kind of affection for him, but the hope of reunion with her husband, of forgiveness and atonement, is sweet.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

The dinner at the Stormonts is as other dinners in the same house. The guests are Mr. and Mrs. Groshen, Dr. and Mrs. Mitsand, and one Miss Mitsand, the ugliest, as Fred remarks with a sense of injury. The flower-pots on the table, the silver dishes, the ruby hock glasses, the finger-glasses engraved with the Greek key pattern, the talk, the twaddle, Mrs. Groshen's Honiton lace, how well Sibyl know them all! She breathes a sigh for the days that are gone, before that slow, pompous banquet is ended, and thinks that after all there was more pleasure in a haddock and a cup of tea in Dixon Street than in all this provincial splendour.

The talk is chiefly of the races, who was there and who was not there. The county families are brought on the table, and discussed fully, together with the genealogies, which are as well known and as complicated as if they were Greek heroes or demigods.

Mrs. Stormont praises Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and those dear girls his sisters, and talks of the rose-garden and ferneries at the How; whereby she bears down rather heavily upon Mrs Groshen, who has never been bidden to that earthly paradise. Mr. Groshen opines that Sir Wilfred is better off than most o the county people, whom he disparages as a shabby lot, but add that at the rate Sir Wilford is going on with his drags an hunters he is likely to outrun the constable before he is man years older.

That the evening entertainment which follows the feast is ull, not even Mrs. Stormont's dearest friend Mrs. Groshen could eny, were her views taken on the subject.

Sibyl knows every piece of furniture in the drawing-room by eart, every photograph in the album. She knows the Miss tormont's favourite fantasias better than those performers emselves, or they would play more correctly. She knows xactly how she will be asked to play one of her lovely pieces, to sing one of her sweet songs, and how the young ladies will etend to delight in Chopin, and the elders praise her wonderful ingering," and how stifled yawns will at intervals prevail mong the company. She knows how Violet will tell her about me new fern she has discovered, "such a darling"; and how ose will ask her if she is going on the Continent this year, and ll then favour her with some interesting facts about her Swiss ur with papa three years ago.

What a blessed relief when the clock on the mantelpiece rikes eleven! Sibyl has been wondering for ever so long why r carriage has not been announced.

"Dear Mrs. Stormont, I think they must have forgotten me," says. "But we are such near neighbours, I can walk home ily."

"My love, it is quite early; don't talk of going; the carriage l come for you, I am sure. We want another of those deli-us sonatas. Not going, surely, Mrs. Groshen," cries Mrs. rmont, rejoicing in her soul to see the banker and his wife ancing to her, stately and smiling, to tell her that they have nt "a most enjoyable evening."

very one discovers that it is frightfully late. No one would e supposed it for an instant. How swift are the pinions of e when pleasure quickens them!

rs. Stormont, pressed by Sibyl, makes an inquiry about Mr. nchard's carriage. It has not come.

We walked here," says Mr. Groshen. "Matilda grumbled t her dress, but I wouldn't have my horses harnessed again r they had come from the racecourse, and I couldn't have standing in harness while she changed her dress. It is no having fine horses if you don't study them a little. And e such near neighbours. We'll take care of you, Miss thorpe, if you don't mind walking."

should like it," says Sibyl, with a longing look at the cool le night beyond the open window of the gaslit room.

ed springs up eagerly from the ottoman on which he has sitting in patient attendance on the unattractive Miss und.

et me see you home, Miss Faunthorpe. I shall be de-ed."

Sibyl runs away to put on her bonnet, and the guests issue forth in a bevy. Dr. Mitsand's useful brougham is waiting, the others walk home in the tranquil perfumed air. Fred offers his arm, which Sibyl accepts with the infinite ease of indifference. Mr. and Mrs. Groshen make themselves agreeable by walking on briskly.

"Isn't it a lovely night?" gasps Fred, rapturously.

"Yes, it's very fine. We generally have nice evenings in June."

"Ye-es," replies Fred, after judicious consideration. "I think we do. Nice long evenings, at any rate. The twenty-first being the longest day, of course, is a reason. Nice month for races, too; but rather rainy sometimes, don't you think?"

Sibyl concedes the point.

"I remember one wet June—poured all the month—regular cats and dogs. The racecourse was a morass; of course the heaviest timbered horse won. Here we are, I declare, close to Lancaster Lodge! How I wish it was further off!"

"Not very flattering to me to wish us less near neighbours," says Sibyl, laughing.

"Oh, come now, Miss Faunthorpe, you know I don't mean that; but just for to-night, for the sake of prolonging this delightful walk."

"Don't talk nonsense, please," says Sibyl. "And be kind enough to ring the bell."

They are standing at the gate by this time, and Fred lingers, as if loth to perform that necessary duty.

He rings, and the lodgekeeper opens the side gate. Sibyl offers Mr. Stormont her hand on the threshold, but gives him no invitation to enter the domain.

"Good night," she says, and then cries suddenly, "Do you hear that?"

It is a most melodious jug-jugging from a dark clump of chestnuts near the gate.

"I hear something chirping," replies Fred, dubiously.

"It's the nightingale. It sings every night just at this time. Isn't it exquisite?"

"Rather throaty," says Fred.

"Good night," repeats Sibyl, shutting the gate in his face.

"Horrid young man!" she ejaculates.

How dark, and cool, and silent, save for those nightingales, the grounds are to-night! She is in no hurry to go into the house. The dewy turf, the tall black trees standing out against a sky of mixed light and colour, the moon rising grandly above the elms yonder, just where the Lancaster Lodge grounds meet the edge of Redcastle Park, Sir John Boldero's domain—all is beautiful.

Sibyl walks slowly along the shrubberied drive, and round to the lawn behind the house, that wide sweep of velvet grass upon which she and her uncle spend the summer afternoons. Mr. Trenchard's study is on this side of the house. The lighted windows inform Sibyl that he has not yet retired for the night.

The study opens on the lawn by a half-glass door. She can go into the house this way, and surprise her forgetful uncle by her return, and tell him all about her day, about Sir Wilford Cardonnel's attentions, of which she is proud. She thinks it will please her uncle to know that one of the magnates of the land has admired her.

She goes towards this glass door, but makes a dead stop before one of the study windows, startled by what she sees there. It s nothing very remarkable, perhaps, at the first showing, only ncle Stephen and a stranger; but the stranger is no ordinary erson, and there is that in Stephen Trenchard's face which makes the scene remarkable.

The lamp burns brightly on the official-looking table, which is pread with papers—formidable-looking papers, bristling with gures, ruled with red ink. They are laid open, as if for inspec- on, and among them lies an open ledger.

Sibyl has no experience which can teach her the exact nature f these papers, but she knows instinctively that they must have me relation to commerce.

Stephen Trenchard's face is black as thunder. His left hand es on that open ledger; with the right he points to a column figures, running his square forefinger down the column with a cious dig of the nail here and there, as much as to say, "Look that, sir, and at that!" and "What do you say to that?"

The stranger stands at Mr. Trenchard's elbow. He is a reigner—an Oriental—Sibyl thinks, though his plain and fault- s clothes are perfectly English. He has a dark olive skin, es black as night, an aquiline nose, a narrow oval face, and ky blue-black hair. He is something less than the middle ight, stout, and sleek. His lips move softly, and his plump llow hand seems to expostulate as Stephen Trenchard scowls the figures.

'Who can he be?" wonders Sibyl, abandoning all intention seeing her uncle to-night. "Some Indian friend of uncle phen's, I suppose. But what can all those papers mean, and y does uncle Stephen look so angry? He looked just like t when he spoke of Philip Secretan."

he goes round to the front of the house. The hall door is n, and the footman is airing himself on the threshold, listen- to the nightingales.

Why wasn't the carriage sent for me?" asks Sibyl.

Indeed, ma'am, I don't know. Was it ordered?"

"I suppose so. Mr. Trenchard said he would send it."

"I'm afraid master must have forgotten, ma'am. I didn't take no message to the coachman. Perhaps it was the gentleman coming to see him that put it out of his mind."

"I suppose so. Who is the gentleman? Do you know?"

"No, ma'am, there was no name given. The gentleman came after dinner, about nine o'clock. He came from London, I believe. The London train hadn't been long in when he came, and he's been with Mr. Trenchard ever since."

"Is he going to stay here to-night?"

"I don't know, ma'am. There's been nothing said, but Mrs. Skinner had the Blue Room got ready in case it should be wanted, as a premonitory measure."

Sibyl yawns languidly, and goes upstairs to her own room, puzzled, but not seriously disturbed. This stranger has come on some business errand evidently. She knows that her uncle's temper is not particularly placid, and concludes that he has been irritated by some vexation of a commercial character. Yet she cannot understand how this can be, since she has been taught to believe that Mr. Trenchard has retired from business.

Curiosity would impel her to await the stranger's departure in the drawing-room, or to discover whether he is to remain for the night; but she does not care to encounter her uncle in his present temper, and he would doubtless be offended by anything that could look like espionage.

It is nearly midnight when she goes to her room. Her windows open on the garden, and are above those of the study. She seats herself by an open window, and looks out into the cool, shadowy garden. Presently she hears a voice raised in anger, her uncle's voice, she knows; but the stranger's tones never reach her ear.

"His voice is like his looks, I dare say," she thinks, "soft, and silky, and cunning. I shouldn't think he was the kind of man uncle Trenchard would trust."

She wastes more than an hour in undressing, brushing her hair, putting away her finery. The clocks strike one, but those lighted windows still shine upon the dark turf below.

"What a long interview!" she thinks. "This Indian gentleman must surely be going to stay all night. He would never leave the house at such an hour as this."

She falls asleep at last, worn out by the fatigues of the day, but at the last moment hears that angry voice of her uncle's suddenly raised in a gust of passion.

She wakes next morning with an uneasy sense of something having gone wrong; but it is some moments before that scene in the room beneath flashes back upon her.

"Who can that man be?" she asks herself again, "and why was uncle Trenchard so angry? Some Indian merchant, perhaps, to whom he has lent money. The loss of a few thousands ought not to make him so angry. It must be a like a drop in the ocean compared with his immense wealth. But then I know he is fond of money, and that it pains him to part even with a ten-pound note."

She dresses, and goes down to the dining room, looking as fresh as the newly opened roses, to which the nightingale sings at sundown. Mr. Trenchard is in his accustomed seat, the big crimson morocco arm-chair drawn into the bay-window. The sashes are up, and the sweet morning air comes in across the flower-beds. Eight o'clock is the hour for breakfast, winter and summer, at Lancaster Lodge, and unpunctuality is little less than a crime in the eyes of Stephen Trenchard, who is usually dressed in his blue frock coat and nankeen waistcoat and trousers by six, and prowling about the grounds to the discomfiture of his gardeners.

He is a shade paler than usual, and has purple shadows under his eyes. His hand shakes a little, Sibyl thinks, as he turns the leaves of the Manchester daily, which he reads every morning before breakfast. The face he turns to her as she bends over him to administer her morning kiss has an old and wan look in the sunshine. Can it be that Mrs. Stormont is right, and that Stephen Trenchard is breaking up?

There are no early prayers at Lancaster Lodge. Mr. Trenchard has his ideas upon religion, and his own particular creed by which he is to stand or fall, no doubt; but whatever these are, he keeps them strictly to himself. He never goes to church, a neglect of duty which in a person of Mr. Trenchard's consequence Redcastle regards as an eccentricity, but which would make a social outlaw of a small butcher or baker. He has no objection to Sibyl's attendance at the minster, where she exhibits the latest fashions on Sunday mornings. He is no declared infidel. He simply ignores religion, as a thing he has been able to dispense with all his life.

Sibyl takes her place before the silver urn, and begins the business of tea-making. Mr. Trenchard drinks green tea unmixed with black, and is very particular about the preparation of the beverage. Marion has never succeeded in pleasing him in this matter. Sibyl has never failed.

"You are looking so tired this morning, dear uncle!" she says, in her soft winning voice. "You were up very late last night, were you not?"

"How do you know that? You were in bed, I suppose?"

"Not till twelve o'clock. I stayed rather late at the Stormonts, thinking you would send the carriage for me."

"The carriage? ah, to be sure. I forgot."

"It didn't matter in the least. I walked home. That horrid

Fred brought me. Such a lovely night, the walk would have been delightful with any one else."

"Ah, you don't like young Stormont?" says Mr. Trenchard, looking sharply at her. "I'm glad of it, child. He's a genteel pauper at best. You must marry some one better than that."

Sibyl pales at the mention of marriage.

"I don't mean to marry at all, uncle. I'm much happier as I am, with you."

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear! Marriage is a woman's mission, and with your pretty face you are sure to get a rich husband."

"You wouldn't have me marry for money, uncle Trenchard!" cries Sibyl, with a horrified look.

Here is this old man, rolling in wealth, and yet counselling a mercenary marriage.

"I wouldn't have you marry without money. You are no girl to play at love in a cottage. That's a game you'd soon grow tired of."

Sibyl starts as if she had been stung.

"Don't talk of marriage, uncle Trenchard. The subject is hateful to me. There is no one in Redcastle that I care for, or am ever likely to care for."

"I am sorry to hear it," replies Mr. Trenchard, with a moody look, as he resumes his newspaper.

Stephen Trenchard is not a man who riots in the good things of this life. His breakfast consists of a cup of green tea and a little bit of dry toast. His other meals are of the simplest. But there is considerable epicureanism in his simplicity, and he resented a bad dinner as a personal injury.

"I expected to find a visitor here this morning," Sibyl says presently, too curious to be silent on the subject of that nocturnal interview in Mr. Trenchard's study.

"Indeed! Have you invited any one?"

"I should not take such a liberty without your permission—unless it were Marion or Jenny. I thought the gentleman who was with you last night would stay——."

Her uncle looks at her with a darker frown than she has ever provoked before.

"The gentleman came on business, and left as soon as his business was concluded," replies Mr. Trenchard, in chilling tones. "The less you trouble yourself about my affairs, Sibyl, the better for our mutual happiness."

"I only wondered——" falters Sibyl.

"Don't wonder. It's a most unprofitable occupation of the mind. Who told you there was any one with me last night?"

"I saw him."

"Saw him? How?"

"The night was so lovely, that I walked round the garden after Fred Stormont left me at the gate, and I was coming in at your study door, seeing your lamp burning, when I saw that you were not alone."

"The gentleman you saw is a Calcutta merchant, an old acquaintance, who wanted my advice in a critical turn of his affairs. And now you know all that there is to be known, and may leave off wondering."

Mr. Trenchard sips his tea and nibbles his dry toast in silence, and presently disappears altogether behind the county paper.

Sibyl is disappointed. She expected to be questioned about yesterday, to be asked if she had made any conquests, to be able to describe Sir Wilford Cardonnel's obvious subjugation, and the effect which it produced on the Stormonts,—Rose's envious looks, Violet's constrained civility, Fred's anguish of mind as he curveted on the unmanageable gray.

Finding her uncle indisposed for conversation, Sibyl leaves the dining-room as soon as decency permits, and flits away to her favourite retreat—the garden. Life which is all a summer holiday is pleasant enough, doubtless; but oh, how monotonous! and, in Sibyl's case, how lonely!

This morning, exhausted with yesterday's excitement, she throws herself back in her low wicker chair wearily, and sighs two or three times in a quarter of an hour without knowing why, —sighs for the days that are gone—for poverty and Alexis, perhaps, though she would hardly confess as much.

The roses glorify the garden, the trees cast their deep cool shadows on the sunny grass; the house yonder, with all its windows shining in the sun, its venetians, its flower-boxes, its prosperous air, as of a habitation for which wealth has done its uttermost,—all these things remind her that her lot has fallen in a pleasant place. Yet she yearns for something more.

How soon will it come? How soon will the heritage for which she awaits be hers? Mrs. Stormont has noticed a change n Stephen Trenchard, and that change has been very obvious to Sibyl's eyes this morning.

She struggles against sordid, mercenary thoughts, but they are too strong for her. She cannot help speculating about the future which seems drawing nearer, that future which is to re-unite her to Alexis—to open the door of a new glad world, to release her from this dull bondage in the narrow paths of provincial pretence and respectability.

She knows that she is her uncle's favourite niece. Marion is suffered to come and go, but is rarely favoured with so much as a civil word or a kindly glance from Mr. Trenchard. Jenny he openly abominates. Her noisy bouncing ways distress him beyond measure, and she is rarely admitted to his presence. Sibyl therefore concludes that—although Mr. Trenchard, out of kindly feeling, may leave a few thousands to Marion and Jenny; just enough to secure them a competence—the bulk of his fortune will be hers. That vast wealth which has made Redcastle bow down before him will be hers; and Redcastle, which already fawns upon her—honouring her prospective riches—will fall prostrate and worship her.

"Poor uncle Trenchard," she thinks, compassionately. "What is the good of money to the old? His prosperity comes at the wrong end of life. What can his wealth give him? A fine house, where he lives alone, a splendid solitude. Horses which he rarely uses. For all the personal gratification he has out of his wealth he would be as well off with six hundred a year. But he has the homage of Redcastle, which would not be given to a man of limited income, even though he devoted half his revenue to acts of charity."

Sibyl sees the end of her bondage coming near, and thinks of Alexis with tender longing for reunion. Will he come back to her? Will he forgive her? Yes, a thousand times yes. He loves her too well to be obdurate. Whatever anger he may have felt at her abandonment of him will melt away before her smiles.

It is a trial to be so ignorant of his fate, not to know where he is or what he is doing, whether fortune has been kind or cruel to him.

Great heaven! if he should be dead! If the fight should have been too hard, and he fallen!

Her heart grows cold at the mere thought that such a thing is possible. She shudders, clasps her hands over her eyes as if to shut out the horrid spectacle. If he were dead; hope's airy palace built on a fatal quicksand; and the future she has looked forward to a future never to be realized! No, she will not think of anything so hideous. Fate must be kind to true love, and she has loved her husband truly, even when deserting him to secure fortune. She remembers how often she has heard him say that it is easy for a single man to fight the battle of life, that alone he could have struggled on somehow, could have obtained employment, could have roamed the world till he found just the one spot where he could prosper. He has never said it reproachfully. He was too fond of her for that. But he has said it; and the memory of that speech is a consoling thought to Sibyl just now.

"He has emigrated, I dare say," she thinks. "He had a longing to try his luck in Australia. He is on the other side of the world, most likely, and when I am free to call him back to me, I shall have to wait ever so long before he can come."

She is aroused from this reverie, from the deepest deep of thought, by the mellifluous soprano of Mrs. Stormont, raised inquiringly—that society voice in which a comedy actress makes some trivial inquiry at the wing before she appears on the stage.

"In the garden?" screams Mrs. Stormont. "Dear child! I will find her."

Mrs. Stormont emerges from the shrubbery, rustling in a flounced cambric morning dress. She wears a black lace shawl, her last summer's bonnet "done up" inexpensively by her maid, and in honest truth has been "up town" to pay her tradesmen's weekly accounts. The Stormonts, though near, are good pay.

"Old Mother Stormont will haggle about the bone in a bit of brisket, and she will worry about her Sunday sirloin," says Mr. Heffer, the butcher, "but she do pay uncommon reglar, I will say that for the old gal."

Familiarity, induced by Mrs. Stormont's frequent personal visits of complaint or inspection at Mr. Heffer's shop, has bred contempt in that citizen's mind. The customers he respects are those who never cross his threshold or weigh his meat.

Mr. Stormont is followed by a tall stranger in gray, who looks about him admiringly, and whom Sibyl hardly recognises at the first glance.

"Charming place—kept so well, too—garden much neater than my fellows keep the How. How-d'ye-do, Miss Faunthorpe? Hope you weren't tired by the races yesterday."

Sibyl blushes becomingly, startled by this sudden appearance of the mighty Sir Wilford Cardonnel—startled out of all sad thoughts, and gratified by this proof of her power.

"I met this tiresome Sir Wilford in the market-place, Sibyl," ays Mrs. Stormont with juvenile playfulness—which sits upon er portly middle age about as becomingly as the airy gauze onnet on her pepper-and-salt chignon,—"and he insisted upon y bringing him to call on you. I hope you are not shocked ith us for invading you at such a barbarous hour."

Sibyl assures Mrs. Stormont that the hour is a matter of no mportance.

"You are just as glad to see us as if we had come in proper isiting hours," exclaims the lady. "What a dear candid child e is! I don't know what you did with my poor Fred last ight, Sibyl, but you sent him home quite low-spirited."

This is said with meaning, and Sir Wilford looks at the speaker riously.

"Poor Fred," he cries in his loud voice, "I think it must have een the bumping he got on that bony gray that made him low-irited."

"I'm afraid I said good night rather abruptly," says Sibyl, which was very ungrateful of me after his kindness in seeing e home. But I was vexed with him for not appreciating our ghtingales."

"Not appreciate the nightingales! How odd!" exclaims Mrs. Stormont. "Fred has such an ear for music."

"Shouldn't have thought it from his trotting," remarks the candid Sir Wilford. "Man with a good ear always keeps time in the saddle. So you've nightingales here, Miss Faunthorpe? Shouldn't have thought it, so near the town. We've no end of 'em at the How. Jug-jug-jug from sundown till midnight. I should like to show you our gardens at the How, by the by. Mrs. Stormont might drive you over some day."

Mrs. Stormont, divided between her desire to be intimate with the best of the county families, and her maternal solicitude for Fred, whose interests are evidently in peril, can only smile blandly and assentingly. To drive over to the How in a friendly way is to take the highest rank in Redcastle society. Mrs. Groshen will feel absolutely crushed when she is told of such a visit. And after all, poor Fred's courtship hangs on hand dismally, and may never come to anything. Sibyl, although courted by the whole family, has given no token of preference for the eldest hope. Sibyl with Stephen Trenchard's fortune, and exalted into Lady Cardonnel, would be a splendid person to know. The dear girls, Rose and Violet, would be asked to stay at the How, no doubt; might make splendid matches, marry into the county.

The conversation meanders on in the same elevated strain for half an hour while Sibyl and her visitors walk round the garden, Sir Wilford admiring everything "monstrously," to use his own phrase, and grumbling a good deal about those "fellows" of his at the How.

"I never saw such flower-beds," he says; "there's not a dead leaf among 'em."

"My uncle is very particular about the garden," says Sibyl.

"That reminds me that I must ask to be introduced to your uncle."

"I dare say he is in his study," replies Sibyl. "I'll run and see."

She has an idea that it would hardly do to take Sir Wilford to her uncle without some note of preparation, Mr. Trenchard being somewhat out of sorts to-day.

She is saved the trouble of going to the study, however, for Stephen Trenchard is seen coming across the lawn in his Panama hat, and they all three go to meet him. He receives Mrs. Stormont and Sir Wilford graciously, and, the luncheon bell ringing while he is conversing with them, insists upon their staying to luncheon. So they all go together to the dining-room, Mrs. Stormont protesting that her absence will be the cause of consternation at home.

Sibyl is fluttered and a little pleased at the idea of having made such an important conquest,—a useless triumph, of course, for a woman in her position, but one that flatters womanly vanity,

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

THE great city lies seething like some unholy caldron under the blazing August sun, when a lonely wayfarer returns to it after two years' exile on the other side of the world. Rank and fashion, middle-class wealth, professional respectability, have deserted the airy western squares and streets for English watering-places, Welsh mountains, Scottish moors, Irish lakes, or broiling Continental esplanades, spas, conversation-houses, Rhine steamers, and so on: but from this eastern end of the city there is no such exodus: here life holds on patiently through the dog days, here labour knows no respite, and the grinding of the universal mill slackens not.

Alexis Secretan, just disembarked from the famous clipper ship *Oronoko*, surveys the dingy street, the driving crowd, with wonder, not unmingled with loathing. What a weary city it seems to this man, who walked its stony ways two years ago a seeker for bread, and for the most part found only the natural roduct of the soil—a stone! He has found fortune kinder at he antipodes, man more friendly, Nature more liberal of her smiles, less shut out and constrained by brick and mortar. He as achieved no sudden prosperity, he has worked hard and onestly, and has done well; so well as to be able to come back o this sophisticated, unfriendly city, whither fate draws him as magnet.

It is not possible for a man to feel more lonely than this re-urning wayfarer. In all the vast city which spreads itself about nd around him there lives only one person from whom he can ope for a friendly smile of welcome. His humble friend Dick lowden is the only being to whom he can go with any certainty f not being considered a bore and an intruder. His old brother fficers—the companions of his brief day of prosperity,—alas! e wore out the friendship of those when he sank to that lowest rade in the animal creation—the borrowing animal.

Dear old Dick! honest, friendly Dick, to whom he has long nce repaid that ten-pound note borrowed for the false wife who eserted him—it is to Dick he goes naturally to-day, as brother es to brother. It is to Dick's recommendation to Messrs. Keel nd Skrew he owes the honourable independence of the last two ears. But for Dick's influence he would never have got that ir start in a new world which has enabled him to keep his head above water, and do Messrs. Keel and Skrew honourable service on the other side of the globe.

He can afford to take a hansom, and drive to the Brompton Road as fast as a broken-down thorough-bred can take him. Dear old Dick is in the little back parlour hard at work, as on that snowy day when desperation guided Alexis to that last resource of the desperate—the humble friend of better days. But Dick is not occupied to-day in the mechanical drudgery of map-painting; he is writing a book, a little book on astronomy, for the use of schools,—that elementary geography of his having been a success.

He starts up at sight of Alexis, who has pushed by the maid-of-all-work and entered unannounced. The two men greet each other heartily.

"Captain Secretan! What a delightful surprise! and looking so well too, so handsome, just like my original captain, who took mother's first floor."

"Dear old Dick!"

"But I did not expect you home for ever so long. I thought you were going to stop at Sidney, working for the firm until you had made your fortune."

"Fortune is all very well, Dick—and the firm is all very well. They have been liberal employers, and I have worked honestly for them. But the soul of man needs something more than fifteen per cent. commission upon all his dealings. There was an emptiness in my heart, Dick, out yonder—a cavity that needed filling somehow,—so I took the first opportunity to slip across to the old world, though God knows there's little chance of filling the vacuum here. However, I shall only stop a month or so, and then go back again. The firm has been very kind about the matter. I told them my health was failing, and that the voyage home was my only hope of getting strong again, so they gave me a free passage both ways, and I'm to hold counsel with them about the opening of a new branch of the business out yonder."

"And were you really ill?" asks Richard Plowden, sympathetically.

"What I told the firm was not much more than the truth, old fellow. When heart-sickness sets in, bodily sickness is pretty sure to follow. My nights were growing sleepless, full of bad thoughts. Well, Dick, you can guess my first question. Any news—of her?"

Richard Plowden shakes his head despondingly.

"I am the last to hear of her," he says,—"I who live as much out of the world as if I were a hermit in a cave."

"She might have come to you to inquire about my fate, knowing you were the only friend adversity had left me."

"She has never come."

"Nor written?"

"Not a line. Forgive me if I wound you, Captain Secretan——"

"Call me Alex, Dick, or we shall quarrel."

"Forgive me if I seem to speak hardly of her, but upon my honour, Alex, it seems to me that you have nothing to do but to forget her. She deserted you when you had the most need of her love, when, if she had been a true woman, she would have clung to you most fondly."

"Granted, Dick. She was selfish, base, cowardly. We had sunk together into the slough of despond, and she contrived to scramble out of it and leave me in the mire. She was clever enough to make use of me to accomplish her escape, sent me out among hard-hearted humanity to borrow, beg, or steal the means by which she meant to separate herself from my fallen fortunes. Do you think I came across the world to seek for her? No, Dick, I am not such a fool. I have been cheated once. I shall never be her dupe again. Do you think I could ever trust her any more?—that if fortune smiled upon us, and she pretended to love me, I could feel any confidence in her truth, any security in her affection? The void in my heart is to be filled, but not by her. I came back to the old world to look for my child,—the child that was to be born to me when my cruel wife left me."

"You do not even know that the child survived its birth?"

"What a Job's comforter you are, Dick! I know nothing except that I am going to hunt for the mother in order that I may find the child."

"The law would give the custody of so young a child to the mother."

"I snap my fingers at the law. Truth is great and shall prevail. So base a wife must be an unworthy mother. I will find her price for the child. She will sell that as she sold me—for a mess of pottage. When I left England I was desperate—mad, perhaps, or I should not have left the land that held my child. My loneliness in that strange world yonder awakened a father's feelings, I found out how dreary a prospect life is to a man who stands alone—a blank and barren desert, with no green oasis—no distant city to which he may direct his steps—a lonely pilgrimage leading nowhere."

"How shall you commence your search?"

"I have thought of that question many a time on board the *Oronoko*. There is little choice of plan left open to me. You remember that before Messrs. Keel and Skrew took me into their employment, I went to Redcastle, the place my wife came from when she came to London as Mrs. Hazleton's governess. I saw

Sibyl's younger sister, made my inquiries, and found that Sibyl had not been heard of at Redcastle. She had not gone straight home to her uncle, the parish doctor, as I had supposed it probable she would, and flung herself and her troubles upon his shoulders. No, she was too artful for that. She had some deeper game in view—some rich relative from whom she had expectations, as I gathered dimly from her letter. I could find out nothing more from the girl than that Sibyl was supposed still to be in Mrs. Hazleton's employment—that her marriage was not known to her family, that she had not reappeared at Redcastle, or received any help from her uncle the doctor. Where could she be, and how could she be living? She must have found the wealthy friend whose existence I inferred from her letter, and this wealthy friend or relative was evidently not an inhabitant of Redcastle. She must have found a safe haven somewhere. I made no further attempt to trace her. I was too deeply stung by her abandonment. 'Let her go,' I said to myself, as I crawled wearily away from that dismal country town, through the January weather, 'she and I have done with each other.' I did not forsee that the hour would come in which the thought of my child would be more precious to me than my false wife's love had even been. But in my lonely days in a strange land —lonely in spite of what the world calls friendship—I have suffered my hopes to build themselves round that one image—the child whose face I have never seen. Now, Dick, there seem to be only two sources of information open to me. I can go down to Redcastle again, and renew my inquiries at Dr. Faunthorpe's; or, before doing that, I can hunt up an honest creature who used to be housemaid at Mrs. Hazleton's, and who made herself useful to my wife in sending her letters, and so helping her to sustain the falsehood which she chose to practise upon her uncle, for quite inadequate reasons, as they always seemed to me. But there are minds to which double-dealing is an absolute pleasure, and hers may be of that order," adds Alexis, bitterly.

"You have not dined," says Richard Plowden, by way of changing the conversation. "I'll order a steak and potatoes. You'll enjoy an English rumpsteak after ship fare, and you know mother's a first-rate cook. You'll take up your quarters with us, of course, while you are in London?"

"I shall go to Redcastle to-morrow, Dick, if I can find Jane Dimond, the housemaid, this evening. But if you can give me a bed for to-night, I will accept it with all gratitude. Don't trouble about dinner. I had a substantial lunch on board the *Oronoko*. I'll go to Lowther Street at once, and we can smoke our pipes together when I come back, and talk over old times, when I was a careless, thriftless bachelor. How selfish I am, talking of my own affairs all this time, and never so much as congratulating you on your success as an author!"

"Don't call me an author," protests Dick, blushing. "That's putting me too much upon a level with Scott and Bulwer, and geniuses of that kind. I was lucky enough to hit upon an easy, simple way of stating hard facts—making information a little more attractive than it has been made for young minds, and the style took with the schools and teachers. My little handbook of geography has gone through fifteen editions, and has been quite a fortune to me, and I am now doing the sixth in a series of handbooks, all more or less geographical, up to the present one, in which I venture upon astronomy. So you see map-painting led to something after all."

"Intelligence and industry always lead to something, Dick. There would be a screw loose in the scheme of the universe if they could ever lead to nothing."

"Those little books have done wonders for us," exclaims Dick, with harmless pride. "Mother doesn't work half so hard as she used, though she will stick to the cooking; and she has a silk gown to wear on Sundays,—doesn't it rustle too! you can hear it at the very top of the staircase,—none of your soft silks for mother, but a silk that stands alone and lets you know that it's there. And I've got a garden. See!"

The Duke of Devonshire could feel no loftier pride in the possession of Chatsworth than swells Richard Plowden's breast to-day, as he draws up the venetian blind and allows his cherished garden to burst upon Alexis Secretan's admiring gaze.

It is a quadrangle of fifteen feet square, shut in by whitewashed walls, overshadowed by leaden cisterns, bounded by the slated roofs of a mews, but Dick has built rockeries in the corners, rockeries where ferns flourish greenly. He has trained ivy over one wall—that blessed parasite which is so fair and quick-growing a screen for brick and mortar abominations—Virginia creeper over another. The grass is soft and green, and in the middle of the little plot there is a stone basin—a timeworn old basin which Dick has picked up for half a sovereign in a builder's yard, but a basin in which a slender jet of water actually plays. Scarlet geraniums in green tubs give colour to the picture; an old stone bench, also a bargain of Dick's, offers repose to the idler in this narrow pleasaunce. Shut in as it is by mews and back kitchens,—overshadowed as it is by cisterns—Richard Plowden's garden is absolutely pretty. Alexis accords it his unmeasured approbation.

"It's the first English garden I've seen for the last two years, Dick, and it smiles at me like a welcome home. Yes, I'll come back in time to smoke a cigar on that stone bench of yours under the summer stars."

"We drink tea out there on fine Sunday afternoons in the warm weather," says Dick, smiling at the ferns and rockwork, "and you can't imagine how proud mother is. I've got the real *Osmunda regalis*, or flowering fern, in that corner, though you'd hardly believe it; and there's a *Polypodium* over there that a friendly lodger of ours brought me from Ilfracombe."

"Well, Dick, I must go and look for Jane Dimond, but I'll be back in a couple of hours at latest."

Dick limps to the door with his friend, and follows his figure with admiring eyes till it vanishes in the current of wayfarers.

"What a fine fellow he is! and to think that a wife could desert him! I'll ask mother to get a bit of something nice for supper, a veal cutlet and a few peas, or a chicken and a slice of broiled ham."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT ARM'S LENGTH.

THERE are some people whose houses never change; people whose habitations are in a manner symbolical of their lives, and whose even tenor of existence nothing less than the undertaker can overthrow. Mrs. Hazleton is one of these eminently respectable personages. She has occupied the house in Lowther Street for the last ten years. She has gone to the sea-side every year of those ten, and at exactly the same period, has returned after the same interval, has given her great parties at the same seasons, and has lived a methodical and prosperous existence, with satisfaction to herself and her neighbours, and with considerable profit to the surrounding shopkeepers. When the London season is over, Mrs. Hazleton goes to the sea-side, not because she belongs to that flight of fashionable swallows who follow pleasure's summer from clime to clime, but simply because London in August is unendurable,—baking pavements, scorched verdure, dust and grime on everything, and a sense of desertion in all those regions which the upper ten thousand and a considerable portion of the lower million inhabit.

There could not be a better time for Alexis to make his inquiry without having to present himself in a formal manner to his old acquaintance. Mrs. Hazleton is at Scarborough, with children, governess, and *femme de chambre*. The blinds are all down, save one of the venetians in the dining-room, which is drawn up about halfway, and in the space thus exposed to view the comfortable round face of Mrs. Hazleton's cook, and the lanky countenance of Mrs. Hazleton's sandy-haired footman—a footman whose visage is happily unfamiliar to Alexis—exhibit themselves. Cook and footman are engaged in looking out of the window. There is not much for them to see in Lowther Street on this August evening, but it is a relief to be above ground for a little while, after the twilight of those underground dungeons to which the London domestic is confined.

Alexis mounts the steps, and knocks and rings, under the calm survey of those two pair of eyes. The sandy-haired footman is not impressed by Mr. Secretan's appearance. Alexis is carelessly dressed in garments of a colonial cut, a velveteen shooting jacket, a soft felt hat, clothes chosen for ease and hard wear rather than for fashion. The footman yawns audibly, and when reminded of his duties by a nudge from cook's plump elbow, mutters contemptuously, "Oh, hang it! that fellow can wait, you know;" and then withdraws himself lazily from his post of observation, and anon opens the street door a little way, filling the opening with his person.

"Is there a young woman called Dimond in service here now?" asks Alexis.

"Dun know, I'm shaw," replies the flunkey, with another yawn. "What do you want with her?"

"We won't go into particulars till you find out whether she's still here," answers Alexis, coolly. "Perhaps you will condescend so far as to inquire of your fellow-servant?"

"Hi, cooky," bawls the footman, "what's our Jane's name? Dimond, ain't it?"

"Of course it is. You might have known," answers cook, who has come into the hall, and now contemplates Alexis over the youth's shoulder.

"What do you want with Jane Dimond?" she inquires sharply. "There's no followers allowed here."

"I'm not a follower," answers Alexis, "but I want to see Jane Dimond alone for five minutes, on business."

The countenances of cook and footman plainly express an apprehension that this is the beginning of a deep-laid scheme against the family plate.

"I'll tell you what, young man," says the cook, with asperity, "my missus is out of town, and we don't want no airy sneaks loafing about while she's away."

"And it ain't no good for them to loaf," adds the sandy-haired young man, who has not shaved for the last day or two, and whose chin is adorned with a tawny stubble like a newly-cut wheat field. "The plate has all been sent to the bank."

Alexis fairly bursts out laughing.

"Is there so much difference between a chimney-pot hat and a wide awake? between Poole and a colonial tailor?" he says to himself, and then he adds aloud. "If one of you simpletons will take the trouble to call Jane Dimond, she will be able to tell you that I'm a gentleman, and that I have not come after the tea-spoons or the umbrellas. I'll wait in the street for her. You can tell her that a gentleman from Australia wants a few words with her."

Cook and footman whisper doubtfully for half a minute, and then shut the door upon Mr. Secretan, leaving him to infer their acquiescence with his request.

He paces the pavement for five minutes or so, and then the good-natured Jane Dimond comes down the steps, while cook and footman stand in the doorway to watch the proceedings.

They see Jane gesticulate as in extreme surprise at sight of Alexis, and then the two walk a little further off, quite out of earshot, to the aggravation of Jane's fellow-servants, whose curiosity is by this time raised to the highest pitch.

"I shouldn't wonder if he was some haristocratic arf-brother of ers," says cook, who is a devoted student of 'Reynolds's Mysteries of London.' "Life is full of family secrets and such like."

"Lor, sir," says Jane Dimond, when she has recovered the shock of surprise; "I thought you was dead and gone."

"Did you, Jane. Why?"

"Because I fancied if you was in the land of the livin' you wouldn't have turned a deaf ear to that advertisement."

"What advertisement?"

"The advertisement as Miss Faunthorpe—I beg pardon, Mrs. ——"

"Never mind the name, girl. Tell me all about the advertisement."

Jane explains herself in a roundabout way, but in due course Alexis knows all that Jane knows, except his wife's present abode. That the girl refuses to tell even to him.

"She told me to keep it a secret, and I'm not going to tell no one without her permission," says Jane resolutely.

This resolve the husband combats, but in vain.

"I'll arst her leaf to tell you, and when I've got her leaf I'll tell you," answers Jane. "Wild horses wouldn't move me from that."

"Telegraph to her then directly," cries Alexis, taking out a handful of silver. "Come with me to the nearest telegraph office, and I'll write the message for you. You can put in the address yourself."

"No, I won't send her no telegrafts, lest I should get her into trouble with her friends. I'll write to her."

"Inexorable girl! Is she in the country?"

"Yes."

"And the country post is gone ever so long. I shall have to wait twenty-four hours before you can get her answer."

"I can't help that," says Jane, with an inflexible air. "She's trusted me, and I'll do my dooty by her. As you've stayed away so long it can't hurt you to stay a little longer."

"Stayed away so long, cruel girl! Don't you know that it was she who left me?"

"Whatever she did, I make no doubt she did it for the best," answers Jane, true to the fair young governess whose donations of lace and ribbon, soiled gloves, darned stockings, and friendly smiles, had won her heart years ago.

"See here, Jane," says Alexis, unfolding a five-pound note. "Here's something to buy you a silk gown for Sundays. Now don't you think that you could contrive to tell me the address at once? You know my wife wishes to see me. The advertisement says that."

"No, it don't," answers Jane, taking a tiny slip of paper out of her shabby old portemonnaie. "The advertisement says nothing of the kind."

She reads as follows:—

"S. S. to Alexis. You are not forgotten. In all I do I am faithful to your interests. I look forward to our reunion. Wait and hope, as I do. Write and tell me where you are, and what you are doing.—Address, S. S., Post Office, Hale Street, Pimlico."

"There, you see," exclaims Jane, triumphant. "There's not a word about wanting to see you. She only wants to hear from you."

"Heartless woman!" mutters Alexis. "Yet I'm glad she was just a little anxious to know my fate. I'll go to a coffee-house, and write to her, and bring the letter to you to post. There's the silk gown for you all the same, Jane, to show that I bear no malice."

"Oh, sir!" cries the housemaid, overcome by this generosity, "I couldn' think——"

"You needn't think about it. You've only to take the money and buy your gown. I'll go and write my letter."

He goes to the nearest coffee-house and writes to Sibyl. There s a touch of bitterness in the composition, though his wounded eart is full of love for her all the time. Neither exile nor the ense of her unkindness have been strong enough to exclude her rom his heart. He may pretend to himself and to his friend ick Plowden that he has ceased to love his wife, that he seeks is child alone; but the mere fact that she has sought to obtain idings of him is enough to melt his heart, to change pride and nger to love and pardon.

"Whatever the exalted sphere in which you now move," he rites, "you may be glad to know that your desertion has not quite been the death of me. I have contrived to live, somehow, though indignation against your cruelty has lacerated my heart, and love for the wife who deserted me has proved an incurable disease. I have not starved or been driven to hang myself, and I have come back from the other side of the world because I have a foolish hankering to know the fate of the woman who swore at the altar to love, honour, and obey me, and kept her vow by abandoning me in my darkest hour of need. Where are you, Sibyl ? and with whom ? What has been your reward for deserting me? Has your scheme of life been a wise one ? Have your hopes prospered ?

"Write and answer all these questions freely and fully if you recognise the tie which, in the sight of God and man, makes us two one. Tell me about our child, the infant I have never seen, yet whose baby face has haunted my dreams. You have given your babe to the care of strangers, perhaps, but I conclude you have watched over its welfare.

"Tell me further if there are in your life—prosperous as it may be—some few weaker moments when your heart yearns for reunion with the husband you once loved. But no, love, I will show you an easier way. Do not stop to answer one of these questions.

"Write, Sibyl, from your heart to mine. Tell me in three words to come to you, and I will come. I will come, dear, and all the past, all that you have made me suffer, shall be forgotten and forgiven in the rapture of our reunion.—Yours for ever, if you will have it so,—ALEXIS."

He is swayed to and fro by diverse passions as he writes this letter, now all bitterness, now fond unreasoning love. He has not the courage to read over his effusion, but seals and addresses it hastily, and hurries back to Lowther Street. There is no difficulty about admittance this time. Jane Dimond opens the door, receives the letter, and promises to post it that evening.

It is too late for any of the provincial mails, but it is something to be assured that there shall be no needless delay.

"I shall call for the answer the day after to-morrow, in the evening. You ought to have it by that time," says Alexis, and it seems to him that the interval will be an unendurable space of time.

He thinks about that advertisement as he goes back to the Brompton Road. Sibyl must have cared for him a little, despite her heartless abandonment of him, or she would not have felt this anxiety to be informed of his fate. She would not have committed herself by an act likely to entangle her fate with his. Once having released herself from him she would have held herself altogether aloof—she would have stretched no friendly hand across the gulf if she had not loved him. Her heart was still his, he tells himself, when she made that appeal to him. Whatever her scheme of life—whatever game she was playing—her heart was true to him.

Comforted by this assurance he is inclined to be wondrously indulgent. to forgive much, should she but prove herself worthy to be forgiven.

He tries to occupy himself with hard-headed business during that weary interval in which he waits for Sibyl's reply. He goes down to Messrs. Keel and Skrew's office, and enters upon the discussion of certain extensions and improvements in the Australian branch of the business, improvements which his experience of the colony has suggested to him. He is well received, and his views approved by Mr. Keel, the senior partner—a gentleman with large ideas, a palatial villa on Clapham Common, vineries, pineries, succession houses, and a stable which is a perennial source of profit to the horse dealers and the veterinary surgeon, and a well-spring of heart-burning and annoyance to its proprietor. Mr. Keel is a gentleman who talks of thousands as meaner people talk of sixpences, and is rumoured to have started in life thirty years ago as a stevedore, and to have founded his fortunes upon the ill-gotten gains supposed to be inseparable from that function.

Mr. Keel is pleased with Mr. Secretan's suggestions.

"You're about the only fellow I ever sent out who seems to understand the Australian trade," he says approvingly, "and I shall push you, young man, mark my words, I shall push you."

Cheered by this assurance, Alexis thinks what a nice thing it will be for him to go back to Sidney with his wife and child for his companions, if Sibyl will but show herself true metal after all, and if his child lives. Two formidable "ifs."

He builds a delightful castle in the air, and looks so well, fed upon this nutriment of hope, that Samuel Plowden scrutinizes him with a serio-comic expression when he returns to the outer office after his interview with Mr. Keel.

"Why, I thought you came home on sick leave, youngster," says the kindly clerk. "By Jupiter, I never saw anyone looking better."

"All the effect of the voyage, Mr. Plowden, I assure you. I was a shadow when I went on board at Sidney."

The second day after Mr. Secretan's interview with Jane Dimond has come, and in the evening Alexis knocks at the familiar door in Lowther Street, with a heart that seems to beat louder than the knocker.

Jane Dimond appears promptly, and divining his impatience, gives him the expected letter without a word. He wrings her hand in speechless gratitude, as if the letter were a boon from her; bids her a brief good night, and goes away with his prize.

He would rather read the letter in the street, unwatched, than open it in Mrs. Hazleton's hall, under the housemaid's friendly eyes.

Yes, it is from Sibyl, in the hand he knows so well. The last letter he received from her was that cruel renunciation, that most heartless farewell—the loosening, nay, the severing of every link between them. She writes to him again. There is communion between them once more. The thought thrills him.

She begins well at all events:—

"DEAREST—DEAREST—DEAREST!"

There is love's foolish rapture in a gush of pen and ink.

"Thank God for your dear letter, though it is not altogether kind. Still it promises forgiveness for my wrong-doing, and that is much. Thank God for the knowledge that you are living and well. My heart grew very heavy when that advertisement of mine remained unanswered.

"You ask me if my scheme of life has realized what I counted upon, if my hopes have prospered. I can say yes to both those questions. I am on the road to high fortune, fortune which you and I will share in happy days to come if you are as true to me as I am to you, though seeming estranged. In a very little while, dear, my most anxious hopes will be realized. The realization is so near that it would be worse than folly to sacrifice those hopes now, as I must sacrifice them if I were to obey you, and say come to me.

"I long to see you, my heart aches, my soul sickens at the thought that we must wait for the hour of reunion. But I am not so weak a slave to impulse as to abandon my prize, just as it is almost won. We must wait, dearest. I ask from you patience and trust. I give you my daily prayers, my nightly dreams. There is no wrong-doing in my scheme of life. I injure no one, least of all do I wrong you. I only forego the happiness of sharing your life for a little while in order to make it brighter afterwards.

"Write to me, dear husband, from time to time, and let me write to you, but let our correspondence pass through the hands of that good girl, Jane Dimond. I know your impulsive nature, and I cannot trust you with my address, for fear you should come here and destroy all my plans. I am known in my present circle only as Miss Faunthorpe. All my hopes would be shipwrecked if I stood confessed as Mrs. Secretan. Yet, believe me, there is no shadow of wrong to you in this concealment. It is for our mutual welfare. You ask me about our child, Alexis. Our child, our son, is safe and well. I dare tell you no more than that.

"Ever, through all changes and dangers, your true and loving wife, SIBYL."

"Is she mad?" Alexis asks himself, indignantly, after reading this letter. "Does she think I am to be put off with loving words and assurances of constancy? Does she suppose that she can keep me at a distance by concealing her address and writing to me under cover to a housemaid? Wherever she may have hidden herself, my business shall be to find her, and my first visit shall be to Redcastle. I'll go straight to her uncle, the doctor, and unearth this mystery."

CHAPTER XIX.

A DANGEROUS TRIUMPH.

THAT visit of Sir Wilford Cardonnel's to Lancaster Lodge is followed in about ten days by a second morning call, the baronet being supported on this occasion by his elder sister, a rather strong-minded young woman, who rejoices in the pastoral name of Phœbe.

"My sisters are dying to know you," says Sir Wilford, with a gush of enthusiasm, after the necessary introductions have been gone through in a slipshod way, Sir Wilford being careless of the rules and ceremonies of polite life.

Miss Cardonnel's countenance does not support her brother's statement by any gleam of light from the spirit within. She is looking round the handsome—upholsterer's—drawing-room with a critical air, taking stock of the big Japanese vases, so like those in the window of the chief grocer at Krampston, the crimson satin curtains, and sofas, half an acre or so of looking-glass, the black boys in front of the console table, holding up golden baskets of emptiness in their ebony arms. A room so different from the spacious saloon at the How, with its faded curtains and fine old pictures, its tulipwood coffee-tables and threadbare carpets, its crystal chandeliers, and cabinets of old English china, collected by the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of the reigning family.

"What a pity these commercial people have everything so fine and so new!" thinks Miss Cardonnel. "If they didn't burst out into all this splendour one might forget they were parvenus. The girl is pretty, I suppose, or what most people call pretty. Features too sharply cut for my taste."

Miss Cardonnel's features are of the blunt order, and her face inclines to that type of beauty which the vulgar mind classifies as "puddingy."

They have found Sibyl in the drawing-room, looking her very prettiest in white muslin, much adorned with Valenciennes, straw-coloured bows dotted about here and there among the flouncings and ruchings, and a broad straw-coloured sash tied with that artistic carelessness which is one of Sibyl's gifts. She has a running account now at Carmichael's, the leading draper of Redcastle, and orders what she likes. The account has been running for the past twelve months, and indulgent as her millionaire uncle is, Sibyl rather dreads the hour when the sum-total of this account shall be brought under his notice. But in a dull provincial town what excitement can a pretty girl have except a little extravagance in the way of dress? Even matrons whose beauty is a matter of tradition are apt to plunge into a vortex of millinery for want of any other whirlpool wherein to rotate.

Stephen Trenchard receives his guests with a marked graciousness, accepts Sir Wilford's friendly advances greedily, and tries to make himself agreeable to Miss Cardonnel, who is rather more stony and unimpressionable than she ought to be if she comes prepared to extend the hand of friendship.

"I am very glad for my niece to make pleasant—indeed distinguished acquaintance," says Mr. Trenchard. "People in Redcastle have been very kind, Mrs. Stormont especially, quite motherly in her goodness to Sibyl. But I am better pleased for her to know county people, there is a—a difference."

"Yes, I suppose you find it so," replies Miss Cardonnel coolly, as if she felt that she belonged to another order of bipeds. "Mrs. Stormont is nice, of course," with seraphic patronage, "very good family, I believe, the Stormonts,"—this dubiously, as much as to say, "so they tell me, poor creatures, but I haven't seen the particulars in Burke."

Sir Wilford has come to ask when Mr. Trenchard is going to drive Miss Faunthorpe over to the How.

"If you want to see our roses, you know, you must not lose any time, you know," he adds, emphatically,—"must they, Phœbe?"

"The roses are nearly over now, Wilford," replies Miss Cardonnel, which remark is not exactly a warm invitation.

"Oh, stuff! why, you were saying that the Dijons were just in their glory this very morning, while we were waiting for the phaeton. When will you come, Miss Faunthorpe? To-morrow—Wednesday—Thursday?"

"We dine at the Friary on Wednesday, Wilford."

"Ah, to be sure. To-morrow, then?"

Sibyl looks embarrassed. This marked attention from the head of a county family kindles no flush of gratified vanity on her cheek to-day. Sir Wilford's admiration was pleasant enough on the racecourse, a triumph in the sight of all Redcastle, but the matter is now growing more serious. She begins to think that she has really made a conquest, that Sir Wilford is disagreeably in earnest.

"It is like the realization of my childish dream about a rich husband, and all the bells in Redcastle ringing for my wedding," she says to herself, "only it comes too late. I am not sorry that it is so. I have no regret. I made my choice, and shall be proud to stand by it when the time comes. Only it is curious that the childish dream should come true after all."

"Will you come to the How to-morrow," Mr. Trenchard?" asks Sir Wilford. "We have some old pictures that you may like to see. There's a Vandyke my father used to think great things of, and our gardens are worth a visit in this weather, though I'm always blowing up those beggars of gardeners. Come early, and we can do the gardens before luncheon, and the pictures after."

"My uncle so seldom goes out in the morning," says Sibyl, quickly, as if eager to find an excuse for declining.

"But this invitation is too tempting to be refused," interposes Mr. Trenchard. "I have heard wonders of the How. Mrs. Stormont is very fond of talking about the How vineries and the How stables."

"Then you'll come to-morrow," exclaims Sir Wilford, delightedly.

Miss Cardonnel is lost in contemplation of the lights and shadows on the lawn, seen under the Spanish blind, which affords but a limited view of the garden.

"If that day will suit Miss Cardonnel's engagements."

"Oh, I shall be very happy, I'm sure," replies the young lady thus directly appealed to.

After this Miss Cardonnel is tolerably civil, and talks to Sibyl a little, questioning her about her habits and amusements,—whether she rides, is fond of croquet, archery, and so on, with rather a district-visiting air, as of a kindly inquirer letting herself down to the level of the lower classes.

"You have a croquet club, or something of that sort in Redcastle," she says, loftily, as if she had never had the institution clearly explained to her. "I rather think my sister and I are honorary members, but we've never been."

"Yes, there is a club for croquet and archery. They meet in Sir John Boldero's park."

"Very nice for you, I dare say," remarks Miss Cardonnel, as much as to say, "People of your class must be provided with amusements of some kind."

They all take a little stroll in the garden presently, and Miss Cardonnel deigns to admire the fine old plane-trees on the lawn. It is a considerable relief to move about in the sunshine, and have flower-beds and standard roses to look at and talk about, after that forced conversation in the drawing-room.

"I think your ribbon borders are better than ours," remarks Miss Cardonnel. "Those are the stables, I suppose," looking at the slated roofs which appear just above the shrubbery. "Have you many saddle-horses?"

"Only the one my uncle bought for me. The groom rides one of the carriage horses."

Miss Cardonnel visibly shudders.

"And is your horse nice?"

"She's a darling, very pretty, and very gentle."

"Indeed," says Miss Cardonnel. "I hate gentle horses. I like a horse to be lively, and give me something to do. It must be rather dull work for you riding alone, if you're not particularly fond of riding."

"Oh, but I'm very fond of riding."

"You don't hunt, I suppose?"

"No, my uncle would hardly like that, I think."

"I dare say not. Wilford, your roans must be very tired of waiting, and I have some more calls to make."

Mr. Trenchard begs his guests to stay to luncheon.

"Thanks; you are very good, but it would be quite impossible." replies Miss Cardonnel, decisively. "I have so much to do before I go home. Then we are to see you at the How to-morrow. Good-bye—Come, Wilford, pray."

Sir Wilford, who has been gazing at Sibyl, and forgetting the engagements of life and time, follows his sister reluctantly, after a cordial leave-taking.

"Well, little woman, I think there's no doubt about your having made a conquest there," says Stephen Trenchard, directly the Cardonnels have vanished.

His tone is at once more cheerful and more affectionate than it has been for some little time, for a period dating from that night on which he received his nameless visitor.

"Please don't talk about conquests, uncle."

"Nonsense, child! It's a subject I'm very glad to talk about. I want you to marry well. I should like you to make a brilliant marriage, Sibyl, before I am gone."

"Dear uncle, pray don't——"

"My love, I'm an old man,—tough and wiry enough, it is true, but well on in years. I can't expect to live for ever. And I should like to see you well placed in life before I say my *nunc dimittis*."

"What does it matter, uncle?" says Sibyl impatiently.

It is so tiresome of this old man—rolling in wealth, and of course intending to bequeath a considerable portion of his riches to her—to harp thus persistently upon the advantages of a good marriage. What could a rich husband avail to one who is to be so richly dowered? Two fortunes are no better than one if the one be large enough for every earthly desire.

"Believe me, dear uncle, I have no idea of marrying. I never shall marry. And as for Sir Wilford Cardonnel," adds Sibyl with asperity, "I positively hate him."

She has her husband's letter in her bosom—that letter written in the Pimlico coffee-house, and transmitted through Jane Dimond's toil-stained hands,—and the idea of any other man's admiration is revolting to her. If—if she dared but tell her uncle the truth! If he had not this rooted hatred of his dead enemy's race, how different life might be!

"Hate a fine, handsome young man—one of the best men in the county—who has come out of his way to pay you attention! I'm ashamed of you, Sibyl," exclaims Stephen Trenchard, and his bristling brows contract threateningly over his keen dark eyes as he scrutinizes Sibyl's pale face.

"I hope there is no one else in the background," he says, "no scamp whose acquaintance you made in London. Perhaps that's the reason why you stayed away so long after I had asked to see you."

Sibyl's pale cheek grows paler.

"There is no one, uncle," she says resolutely, feeling that the situation is desperate. "Have you ever heard me speak of any one? All I want is not to be worried about marrying. If you are tired of me, if you think me an encumbrance, or a burden, send me away. I can go back to uncle Robert, or I can be a governess again."

This little bit of temper, or independence, pleases Mr. Trenchard.

"Don't fly into a passion, little one," he says, kindly. "I suppose you know how pretty you look when you are angry. I won't tease you any more about getting married, but when a good chance offers don't refuse it. That's all I say, my dear."

They go in to luncheon together, and Sibyl resumes those pretty coaxing ways that have won her uncle's heart. She sits near him and ministers to his wants, which are not many, never forgets to hand him the Nepaul pepper, pours out his glass of claret—all with a caressing tenderness which is not without its charm for him.

"I think I shall pay a duty visit this afternoon, uncle, unless you want me for anything."

"Going to see your sister and the old doctor, I suppose," replies Ir. Trenchard. He speaks of Robert Faunthorpe with a touch f compassion, as if the surgeon were considerably his senior, nstead of being his junior by about ten years.

"Yes, uncle. Marion thinks me unkind for not going oftener. ut it's such a long dusty walk through the town, and if I take he carriage she does nothing but sneer at me."

"Poor Marion," says Mr. Trenchard. "She has all the littleness of a girl fresh from boarding school. Let her sneer, child. We must all live our own lives, and let people think what they like about us. You'd better take the carriage."

"It's not worth while. I should like to stop with Marion and Jenny for a few hours. I shall be back to dinner, of course, uncle."

"I'm glad of that. You've spoiled me for lonely dinners, little one. I miss those bright eyes of yours at the other side of the table.'

It is a broiling summer afternoon, and that long empty street below Bar, the broad bright market place, Little Bethel, the British schools, the Sunday school, the Independent Chapel, the Athena Lodge, are all glaring in the sun. Mrs. Groshen has made her house-front a blaze of geranium and calceolaria, festoons of verdure hang down from the encaustic flower-boxes, brass canary cages glitter in the open windows. Dr. Mitsand's grave old house on the shady side of the street, brown and sombre, contrasts this variegated glare. From this point the houses decrease in size and importance, and a little lower down begin the shops—all of a refined and elegant character at this end of the street. The hairdresser's—the stationer and bookseller's—the fancy and Berlin wool warehouse—the photographer's—the fashionable pastrycook's, in whose plate-glass window appear a wooden wedding cake, sumptuously decorated with fly-spotted plaster of Paris, two glass jellies, and three tall glass jars of confectionery of the méringue and cracker bonbon order, which have never been opened within the knowledge of the external world. The méringues, the bonbons, the Savoy biscuits are pale with old age. But the confectioner is not without business, for it is he who supplies the *vol au vents à la Financière*, and the lobster cutlets which are an inevitable feature in a Redcastle dinner.

After these genteeler repositories come the vulgar every-day butchers and bakers, grocers, candlestick-makers, drapers, and tallow-chandlers. The street opens into the market square, in the middle of which stands the town hall, square and imposing, with a façade of no particular style, and a big-faced clock which is always at variance with the minster. Here, too, is the police station at a corner, with a flaming bill stuck against its stony front, offering a reward for the apprehension of the assassin in a murder case which no one has ever heard of. That bill will disappear in a day or two, and no one in Redcastle will ever be any the wiser about the murderer or murder. After the market square the high street, or main artery of the town, dwindles and grows narrow. The shops become dingy and small. There are rows of cottages at intervals; then a row of very ancient and shabby almshouses, whose parlours have sunk below the level of the pavement, and whose upper chambers are no higher than the passing pedestrian's shoulder. Here, at the end of the street, the centre of all this shabbiness, rising sublimely above the petty modern town, stands the minster—one of the most perfect cathedral churches in the land,—its ancient burial-ground stretching widely behind it, a forge and a cluster of old-fashioned cottages for its opposite neighbours, and beyond the white high road and the open fields. There are a few houses and gardens on this high road, and the second of these, on the same side as the minster, is Dr. Faunthorpe's dull old dwelling. The roses are in bloom in the front garden to-day, and brighten the aspect of the house a little, but the roses and the grass, the old cherry tree in the corner, and the jessamine against the wall are all alike whitened with dust.

The garden gate is rarely locked, and the house door is always open in warm weather, so Sibyl has nothing to do but walk in. She has not seen her relatives at this end of the town since she saw them on the racecourse, and she is quite prepared to find Marion somewhat cantankerous. That young lady starts up from the sofa with flushed face, rumpled hair, and a generally towzled appearance, as Sibyl enters the every-day parlour. She has fallen asleep over a novel, in which an impossibly lovely and accomplished heroine revolves in a circle of dukes and duchesses, marquises and millionaires; the male members of which patrician society fall in love with her at the slightest provocation.

"Oh!" exclaims Marion, with a long yawn, "It's you, is it? I didn't expect you'd come and see *us* any more, now that you've made the acquaintance of the county. Pray to what fortuitous combination of circumstances do we owe this unlooked-for honour?" she adds, with a touch of the all-accomplished heroine's dignity.

"Don't be an idiot, Marion. I wonder I ever do come to see you, considering how execrable you make yourself."

"I do not enjoy *your* opportunities," replies Marion, briskly. '*I* am not favoured with the friendship of the Stormonts. *I* don't live in a splendidly furnished house with pampered flunkeys o wait upon me. *I* haven't a running account at the draper's. In short, I'm a low vulgar person altogether."

"Marion, you are too absurd!"

"'Her manners had not the repose that marks the cast of Vere de Vere.' You ought to pity my shortcomings. I dare say when you are Lady Cardonnel you will cut me altogether. You looked s if you would have liked to do it on the racecourse."

"And so I should, you provoking minx. The idea of taking that horrid old rattle-trap of a pony carriage up to the racecourse, o let all Redcastle see how often the harness has been mended, and how the cushions have been devoured by moths!"

"Everybody can't have barouches and pairs," cries Marion, with vixenish energy. "You thought I was going to stay away from the races, did you? while you were enjoying yourself with your grand friends. If you didn't want me to go in uncle Robert's pony chaise, why didn't you take me in uncle Trenchard's barouche? He's my uncle every bit as much as he's yours, unless I'm a changeling. I was to be moping at home, was I, while you were decked out in new bonnets and things, and flirting audaciously with a baronet. Cinderella's sisters were kindness itself compared with you."

"Talk as much nonsense as you like, Marion, I'm not going to quarrel with you. The weather's much too warm for family squabbles. I'm sure I've been nearly melted between Lancaster Lodge and here."

"People accustomed to a barouche must find walking a trial."

"Where's Jenny?"

"Making an object of herself in the garden, I suppose," replies Marion, flinging herself down upon the sofa and resuming her novel.

"I'll go and have a chat with her. She's pleasanter company than you are, at any rate."

"I dare say," says Marion contemptuously, with her back to her sister. "Some people don't like home truths."

Sibyl goes into the garden, not displeased at being on bad terms with Marion. Jenny is the person she has come to see, and it is vital to her to see Jenny alone.

The long old-fashioned garden is a land flowing with milk and honey in this blazing July weather. Gooseberry bushes bending under their heavy load; smooth gooseberries and hairy gooseberries, green, red, and yellow gooseberries, currants red, white, and black. The hoary old bushes grow such fruit as you could rarely find in your orderly modern garden. This midsummer-time is Jane Faunthorpe's saturnalia. She spends the long warm afternoons in a dwarf forest of prickly shrubs, tears her frock to absolute ribbons, neglects her stockings, lets her long tails of brown hair go loose and ragged as a beggar girl's, and in her sister's words makes an object of herself. The fruit she eats all day, the lettuces and other green stuffs she consumes at supper-time, would lay an ordinary mortal low, under the deadly grip of cholera; but Jenny is none the worse for her intemperance, and rises with renewed vigour every morning to run riot among the gooseberry bushes. Dr. Faunthorpe remonstrates occasionally on the subject of his youngest niece's unkempt and down-at-heel condition, and remarks plaintively that she is not exactly a credit to him or to her sisters. But Marion flings the burden of blame on Jane. She is quite incorrigible. It is useless to attempt improvement.

"If I were to work my fingers to the bone to-day, she'd be just as ragged to-morrow," argues Marion.

"But, my love, there are rents, absolute rents in her frock which might surely be sewn up with very little labour," pleads the mild doctor.

"Then let her sew them up herself," exclaims Marion, "she's old enough. I shan't encourage her to be a tear-coat by doing all her mending."

The old servant and factotum, Hester, girds at both,—Jenny for her sluttishness, Marion for her fine-ladyism.

"You can pore your eyes out over a bit of trumpery to make yourself smart," she says to the elder damsel, "yet you won't hread a needle to make your sister tidy."

Thus Jenny is an element of discord in the house, and, conscious of this fact, confines herself but seldom within its walls. She rambles about the garden, or squats in dusty corners, or hides among the gooseberry bushes all day long. She has sundry members of the animal kingdom for her amusement, a blind ackdaw in a dilapidated old cage in the stable, caterpillars and reen beetles in paper boxes or old pickle bottles, a family of hite mice, a hutch full of rabbits. With these companions she s perfectly happy.

Sibyl finds her youngest sister sitting on the ground in a spot here the gooseberries grow thickest, sunburnt, disorderly, her lentiful brown hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, no ollar, no cuffs, a dirty holland gown out at elbows and too short t the wrists, and two stout legs stretched straight before her in rinkled stockings, two overgrown feet in clumsy boots making hemselves ungracefully conspicuous. Jenny Faunthorpe is not bad-looking girl, and may possibly develop eventually into a ood-looking woman, but in her present wild state she has not at air of refinement which Sibyl would like to see in her sister. To-day, however, Sibyl is anxious to be on good terms with is young Bohemian.

"Well, child, burning yourself to a cinder as usual," she gins, "and you might have such a nice complexion if you ould only take care of it."

"I should never have *your* complexion," answers the reprobate ild without looking up; "I'm not made of tinted marble, like . Somebody's coloured Venus."

"Get up, you silly girl, and let me have a look at you."

"De-ah me!" cries Jenny, "So you know me to-day; you n't seem to recognise me on the racecourse last week, in uncle bert's pony chaise. You needn't have been so proud. We e carriage people just as much as you. A carriage is a riage anyhow."

There are some carriages that are a great deal more disgraceful than walking," exclaims Sibyl, forgetting the necessity of conciliating this outspoken child.

"Yes, carriages that people ride in through lick spittling, and turning their backs on their truest benefactors," cries the incorrigible Jane. "If it hadn't been for uncle Robert's goodness we might all have died of starvation when we were tiny children. Uncle Trenchard did not think of us then, oh dear no. But uncle Trenchard can leave us a lot of money, and uncle Robert can't, so we court uncle Trenchard. At least some of us do—not a hundred miles from this gooseberry bush."

"Well, Jenny, I came here this overpowering afternoon, through that baking town, on purpose to see you, but as you're not particularly civil I may as well go back."

"No, you needn't," cries Jenny, springing up from the ground and letting a shower of gooseberry skins fall from her lap. "I feel better tempered now that I've given you a piece of my mind, but when you see me again in a public place, Sib, don't you try to cut me, because it won't do. I'm not going to be cut by my own flesh and blood. I'll run and coax Hester to let us have tea in the arbour. You know that old vine in the corner; it doesn't grow grapes, but it grows lots of leaves; me and Tom Sprig have made an arbour, and trained that old vine over it."

"I should say Tom Sprig and I."

"Should you? I shouldn't. If I'm not of more consequence than a boy that comes to litter the pony for eighteen-pence a week, I don't know English grammar. Such an awfully jolly arbour, Sib. I'll run and see about tea."

There is a vision of legs whirling wildly down the garden walk, and Jane is gone to hold parley with honest old Hester, who stands at a wash-tub by the back kitchen window, the perspiration pouring down her toilworn face. There are women in the world who bear all the burden of family cares without the sweets of kindred, and this faithful old servant is one of these. She has toiled and striven for Dr. Faunthorpe's nieces as if they were her own flesh and blood; has scolded and praised them, worked for them and thought for them, risen early and gone to bed late; and except that she is recognised in a general way as a good creature, too fond of using her tongue, she has not much reward for her labours in this sublunary sphere.

"Tea in the arbour!" cries her shrill voice, "and on a washing day! Who ever heard of such a thing? You're never happy unless you're giving trouble."

"But we must have tea somewhere, musn't we, stupid? And what's the difference of our having it in the arbour if I carry out the tray?"

"Yes, and smash half the cups and saucers."

"Oh dear yes: I'm always smashing things, ain't I? Who was it broke the pie-dish yesterday? Not me."

The damsel opens a cupboard, takes out loaf and butter-dish, whisks a tea-tray from its shelf, and arranges cups and saucers with a tremendous clatter, while the longsuffering Hester is wiping her shrivelled hands. There is a good deal of squabbling, but the tray is laid between the disputants, the tea made, a plateful of bread and butter, and another plate of plain currant cake cut, and Hester bears the tray off to the garden, Jenny following with the cake and bread and butter, radiant at her victory.

The arbour, in an angle of the crumbling red brick wall, is not altogether a bad place after its fashion. An ancient fig tree, which grows anyhow, and bears innumerable figs that never ripen, shields t on one side, the vine covers the other side, and trails over the op. Tom Sprigg, the stable-boy, has exercised his mechanical genius in constructing a rude table and bench out of old packing ases—Jenny has painted bench and table a vivid green.

Here Hester places the tea-tray, under protest, after a passing od—not a very friendly salutation—to Sibyl.

"If you like earwigs in your teas you'll have 'em in plenty," ie says, as she surveys the rustic banquet. "There's no counting for tastes;" and with this remark she returns to her ash-tub.

"I'll run and fetch Marion," says Jenny.

"Not just this minute, dear," says Sibyl, stopping her. "I unt to have a few words with you alone."

For an instant or so Jenny apprehends a lecture, but as Sibyl nds her arm caressingly round her sister's waist, Jenny opines at she is wanted to share some agreeable confidence.

"You are going to tell me about *him*," she cries eagerly. Do, Sib. When is it to be?"

"Whom do you mean by *him?*"

"Sir Wilford Cardonnel, of course. Anybody could see that vas a case of smite."

"Jenny, what horrid language!"

"I mean to say that he was smitten. And he has called on t with Mrs. Stormont, too. That must mean something."

"Who told you that?"

"Hester knows a young woman that's housemaid at Mrs. rmont's, and she tells us all that goes on Above Bar. Oh, re not quite cut off from the world of fashion, though we do at the shabby end of the town. When is it to be, Sib?"

hey are walking slowly up and down the path by the old red , and the border where clove carnations and cabbage roses v in wildest luxuriance.

When is *what* to be, child?"

"Your wedding. When are you going to be Lady Cardonnel? You'll let me be bridesmaid, won't you, Sib? I'll try to be graceful. I'll take such pains with myself for a month beforehand, and I'm your own sister, you know. It stands to reason I ought to be bridesmaid; I've just as good a right as Marion. When is it going to be, Sib?"

"Never," cries Sibyl, turning upon her angrily; "and if you allow your tongue to run on in this ridiculous manner I shan't come to see you any more."

"But you'd marry him if he asked you, sure to goodness," exclaims Jane. "Sure to goodness" is a favourite ejaculation of Hester's.

"No, I should not, Jenny;" and, in a gush of feeling or remorse, or utter helplessness, Sibyl flings her arms round Jane Faunthorpe's neck, and sobs upon her shoulder.

"Sibyl, whatever *is* the matter?"

"I'll tell you presently. Oh, Jenny, I'm very miserable."

"Miserable, with that lovely hat, and with all that Madeira work on your dress?"

"Yes, Jane. I want some one to help me, some one to pity me, and I would rather trust you than Marion."

"Trust me, then. You might trust me with high treason," cries Jenny, vehemently, her notions of history being for the most part derived from Mr. Ainsworth's novels. "If I had my flesh torn off with red-hot pincers, or my feet screwed up in iron boots, I wouldn't tell. You'd get no Rye House Plot out of me."

"Yes, I think I can trust you, Jenny," says Sibyl, drying her tears. "You were always my favourite sister, you know."

"I didn't know it, though I remember you said so when I told you about that man."

"Yes, dear, I always loved you best."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Sib; and I shall be your bridesmaid, shan't I, when you marry, and wear white muslin over white silk, a pink sash, and a wreath of pink daisies? That's *my* idea of a bridesmaid's dress."

"I shall never have any bridesmaids, Jenny."

CHAPTER XX.

HALF CONFIDENCE.

"WHAT do you mean by not having any bridesmaids, Sibyl?" demands Jenny, as the sisters walk slowly along the garden path. "You can't be married without them, can you?"

"Yes," answers Sibyl: "I know a girl who was married one morning with not a soul belonging to her in the church."

"Gracious goodness! Who gave her away?"

"The beadle."

"How horrid!"

"And now let's be serious, Jenny. Do you remember that man who came here two years ago in the winter, and questioned you about me?"

"As if I were likely to forget him!"

"If he were to come again, and want to see me, what should you say to him?"

"Well, that would depend upon how he was dressed. If he looked like a beggar, as he did last time, I should tell him some bouncer or other, and send him away, because I'm sure you wouldn't like a ragged person to come and ask for you at Lancaster Lodge."

"What a sensible girl you are, Jenny!"

"Yes, I believe my head is screwed on pretty tight."

"Now listen, darling. If that poor young man should come here again and ask you questions about me, you must contrive to send him away with the idea that I am ever so far from Redcastle. In Scotland, Ireland, anywhere you like. But you must not say that I am abroad, as he knows that I'm within a twenty-four hours' post of London. Say what you like, but don't let him know that I'm in Redcastle; and whatever you do, don't mention uncle Trenchard's name."

"I'll be as secret as the grave," answers Jane, solemnly. "Don't you think that tea will be overdrawn?"

"Let it draw a little longer. We all like it strong, you know. You shall have this hat next week, Jenny, since you think it pretty."

"Pretty! It's absolutely divine! Marion will be awfully ealous."

"I can't help that. If Marion were a little more civil I should rive her plenty of pretty things. Now listen, Jenny. Suppose hat poor young man were to say curious things—were to tell you omething strange about me——"

"What could he tell me?" asks Jane, making her eyes as round s marbles.

"Never mind what. You must not be surprised, and you must ot let him discover anything from your manner. Above all, nember that he is to know nothing about uncle Trenchard. It is othing wrong that I am asking you to do, Jenny, except so far s it is wrong to tell a falsehood, and I really think even that is xcusable when one is in a great dilemma."

"*I* don't mind telling a bouncer," says Jane, boldly. "Bouncers ever weigh much on my conscience."

"It is very wicked to tell stories in a general way. You ought to know that, Jenny. But this is quite an exceptional case. It is all for the best. All will come right in the end. And I shall love you dearly, Jenny, if you will help me out of my difficulties. Mind, the person I speak of may not come here again. I only wish you to be prepared for him if he should come."

"I'm prepared," answered Jenny, boldly. "Poor fellow! I did feel sorry for him that bitter winter day. He looked so tired and worn—very good-looking, too, in spite of all. How handsome he must be when he's well dressed!"

"Yes, he is very handsome," says Sibyl, pensively.

"And you like him, Sib—just a little bit?"

"I loved him with all my heart—I love him still—I am true to him through all difficulties. Remember that always, Jenny."

"Gracious!" cries Jenny. "And it is on his account that you would refuse to marry Sir Wilford Cardonnel if he were to ask you?"

"Yes, Jenny."

"But I say, Sib, suppose he should come to the front door, and Marion or Hester should get hold of him?"

"You must be on the watch to prevent that. If he comes at all, he is likely to come within the next few days. I rely upon your cleverness to prevent his seeing Marion or Hester."

"Very well. It will be difficult, but I'll do my best. And now I'd better run and call Marion to tea, or she'll begin to think there are secrets between you and I."

"Between you and me, Jenny!"

"Oh, bother! If I say me, it's I; if I say I, it's me. I'll run for Marion."

Again appears that vision of legs whirling wildly, and scanty skirts flying in the wind. Sibyl strolls along the path, and looks at the big cabbage roses, the red crinkled wall, the sprawling vegetable marrows, the flush of uncultivated fertility. Red and yellow dragon's-mouth flourishes on the wall. Stonecrop in full flower yonder on the sloping roof of the tumbledown old shed, that serves as a stable, converts the thatch into a roof of gold. Butterflies, bees, and all the summer insects, are flying from flower to flower, carrying the yellow pollen on their honey-smeared wings, and intermarrying all the families of blossoms as they flutter to and fro. It is only poverty's poorly tended garden, but how full of colour and perfume and beauty! It is almost as good as uncle Trenchard's velvet lawn and mosaic flower-beds. "One feels more at home here," thinks Sibyl.

"I wish I were Jenny or Marion, without a care for what to-morrow may bring forth," she thinks; "even though I forfeited my chance of uncle Trenchard's fortune."

Marion comes along the path by the gooseberry bushes presently, tearing her muslin skirt once or twice by contact with the straggling thorny branches on the way, and muttering little ejaculations which come as near swearing as a lady can permit herself to venture.

"Plague take the brambles!" she cries. "At uncle Trenchard's the kitchen-garden is in its proper place, not all mixed up with the flowers. How you must laugh at us, Sibyl, for drinking tea in such an arbour as that, and calling it pleasure!"

"Not at all. I am very fond of uncle Robert's old garden; and I think everything grows here better than at Lancaster Lodge."

"It's very considerate of you to say that, in order to reconcile us to our lowly lot," replies Marion, with a sneer, as she takes her place on the narrow green bench, and begins to pour out the tea.

"Milk and sugar, I suppose? You used to take both when I had the privilege of being intimate with you—of course it's cream at Lancaster Lodge—and the sugar doesn't look as if it had the jaundice, as ours does."

Marion is not comfortably awake yet; her eyes have a watery look; the great lump of hair and padding with which she adorns the top of her head is pushed awry; her toilet has an air of faded fashion, of tumbled frippery, which is suggestive of a struggle to be fine under disadvantages. No dress is more becoming to a girlish wearer than fresh uncreased muslin; but a muslin dress that has been worn three days and slept in three afternoons is not the loveliest of garments. Marion has pinned a bow here and there, and has put on the last fashionable ruffle at one and elevenpence threefarthings, and has done her best to embellish the soiled muslin, but the result is failure, and she feels that it is so as she looks at Sibyl's pure white cambric and delicate Madeira embroidery.

"I wonder you are so fond of mauve, Sibyl," she says, after a critical survey of her sister's hat. "It doesn't suit you by any means. You look as white as chalk."

"The warm weather is rather trying," answers Sibyl.

"And you have such black marks under your eyes."

"I have not slept well lately."

"You look like it. One would think you had something dreadful on your conscience. Take that horrid caterpillar off the bread-and-butter plate, Jenny. I declare this den of yours swarms with reptiles. I saw a toad under the bench yesterday."

"Toads are valuable animals," answers Jane. "They eat the snails like one o'clock."

"Another of your ladylike similes. Poor uncle Robert! I pity him when I think how his money was wasted in paying for that child's schooling. The only education she got was the bad language she picked up in the street on her way to school and back. If uncle Trenchard had a spark of family feeling he'd send her to a good boarding-school, where she'd be licked into shape."

"Licked into shape isn't *my* idea of elegant language," remarks Jenny, with her mouth full of bread-and-butter.

"But I forgot," pursues Marion, ignoring this interruption. "Uncle Trenchard reserves all his generosity for *one* member of this family. Any attempt of ours to obtain a share of his favour would be regarded as an intrusion. We are outsiders. But if ever a child was going to ruin for want of proper tuition, Jenny is that child."

"I should have thought you might have taught her yourself, Marion," says Sibyl.

"Should you? Then perhaps you'll be kind enough to try the experiment some morning for an hour or two before you think any more about it. A more unteachable brat I never came across in all my life, and I took the fourth class at Miss Worrie's for a week when you were laid up with scarlatina."

"I don't like to be taught by an ignoramus," exclaims the contumacious Jenny. "Who was it said *nous allerons* was the future of *aller?* People should learn before they teach. At least, that's my idea."

Sibyl, wearied with these recriminatory passages, looks at her watch, and finds that it is time for her to go back to Lancaster Lodge.

"It's half an hour's walk," she says. "And I must be dressed for dinner by seven; uncle Trenchard likes me to be in the drawing-room half an hour before dinner."

"Ah, no wonder you don't care about our currant cake when you're going to have a regular tuck-out at half-past seven," exclaims Jenny.

"If you knew how little appetite I have for uncle Trenchard's grand dinners, Jenny, you wouldn't envy me," says Sibyl.

"In fact, my dear Jenny," exclaims Marion, going over to the enemy, "Sibyl is a woman of fashion, a superior being whom you and I are not qualified to comprehend."

This remark winds up the skirmish, Sibyl wishes Marion good-bye, and leaves the arbour, followed by Jenny, who hangs on her as they walk down the narrow path. At the kitchen window Sibyl pauses to say a civil word to Hester.

"And how are you, Hester, this warm weather?" she inquires.

"Just as hard at work as if it was cold weather," replies Hester, in no wise mollified by the sweetness of this address. "Your uncle's shirts have to be washed, even if it is the dog days, and the perspiration running down one's face. As to how I am in myself, I haven't got time to think whether I'm ill or well, and that's all about it."

"I hope uncle Robert is feeling better than when I saw him last," remarks Sibyl, playing with the ivory handle of her parasol, embarrassed by the faithful servant's stern countenance.

"Then he isn't," snaps Hester. "And a deal you care about it. I wouldn't be a hypocrite, if I was you, Miss Sibyl. You've got your rich uncle. Stick to him. And don't pretend to care about the poor uncle that brought you up."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Sibyl, half angry. "I wonder that I ever come here."

"So do I, miss. You come so seldom that you might just as well stay away altogether. It would be more consistent."

CHAPTER XXI.

RECEIVED BY THE COUNTY.

At half-past twelve o'clock on the following day Sibyl and Mr. Trenchard start on their drive to the How. It is more than an hour's drive, even with Mr. Trenchard's well-fed horses, who are used so little that they are in a chronic state of either wanting to run away or languishing into a crawl. Their paces between Redcastle and the How are an alternate bolt and dawdle, and perhaps, on the whole, they take more time about the journey than the less pampered steeds which ply for hire at Redcastle station.

Sir Wilford Cardonnel is smoking his cigar on the grassy walk inside the moat as Mr. Trenchard's carriage drives through the gateway. The How is a good old place of the moated grange order. Tudor gables and windows in front; roofs and chimneys at the back of the premises of an earlier period; a fine old chapel, which has been converted into a drawing-room; a monkish refectory, which has been made a billiard room. The gardens are lovely, and that deep wide moat, with its dark still water and smooth green banks, adds not a little to their beauty. A swan comes sailing down the dark shining water as Sibyl alights, assisted by Sir Wilford, who has thrown away his cigar and come to welcome his guests.

"How late you are!" he exclaims. "I have been expecting you for the last two hours. Now what will you see first?—the stables or the gardens?"

Sibyl is going to say the gardens, but Mr. Trenchard, who knows that his host's tastes are turfy, votes for the stables.

"I'm so glad you like stables," exclaims Sir Wilford, addressing himself to Sibyl, as if the choice were hers. "I'm rather proud of mine, you know. I've spent a good deal of money upon 'em. They were regular pigsties when I inherited the place. My poor father didn't care about his stables, you know. As long as he had a couple of carriage horses to drag the family about, a weight-carrying cob for his own use, and a pony or two for us children, he was satisfied. His horses weren't members of his family. Why, in his time the gardeners and farm labourers were as well accommodated as the horses," concludes Sir Wilford, as if this were the summit of iniquity.

They traverse a shrubbery, and find themselves in the stable department, a spacious quadrangle, stone-paved, with a stone basin of water in the middle. Numbered doors, and windows adorned with flower-boxes, surround this neat square quadrangle, each door opening into a loose box, each number belonging to a special quadruped in Sir Wilford's stud. Within, the loose boxes are as neat as a spinster annuitant's best parlour. Each horse is provided with a cat or dog for company, while one animal, more social than the rest, is not satisfied without the society of a stable boy, who sits in a corner of his box reading the paper all the summer afternoon, while the lordly beast stares dreamily at him across the swinging door, and makes an occasional snap at him, displaying an appalling range of long yellow teeth, in pure playfulness.

Sibyl is introduced severally to the horses, who are swathed in double sets of clothing, as if they were in Siberia.

"Why are the poor things wrapped up so this warm weather?" inquires Sibyl.

"That's to keep up the beauty of their coats, mum," says a stable boy.

Numerous animals are unclothed, and brought out in the sunny quadrangle to display their various graces. They all seem pretty much alike to Sibyl, except that some are thin and some thick. Sibyl admires the slimmer animals, but Sir Wilford, Mr. Trenchard, and the stud groom go into raptures about the thicker and more stalwart quadrupeds.

"There's a shoulder!" says the groom, punching a bull-necked brute. "Carry a church."

"There are legs," cries Sir Wilford, "regular gateposts!"

"Shall I bring out Bull of Bashan, sir?" inquires the stud groom, and another thick-set beast is led forth, plunging viciously to the rearwards as he emerges from his cool retreat.

Bull of Bashan is the gem of the stud. His leading qualification is cobbiness. He has a thick neck, thick legs, a straight line from hock to fetlock, short barrel, broad chest, an eye like Jove to threaten or command, and not a white hair about him, as the stud groom remarks complacently. Time was when Bull of Bashan would have been esteemed a serviceable horse for a village miller, or a tenant farmer. To-day he is the last fashion for a gentleman of fortune.

"Ran away with a stable boy yesterday morning when he was being exercised," says Sir Wilford, approvingly, patting the beast's solid shoulder, which familiarity the Bull resents by sticking his ears back till he appears to be unprovided with those appendages, and giving a vicious kick in the direction of his master's shins.

"How do you like the Bull, Miss Faunthorpe?"

"Isn't he rather bad tempered?" inquires Sibyl, doubtfully.

"Oh, he's a lively horse, I admit, but the best goer in the stable. The men don't care about riding him, but he and I understand each other,—don't we, Bull? There, take him in, Chanter."

They look into other loose boxes, and Sibyl begins to think there is no end to the horses; but the stable inspection is over at last, and they go back to the gardens, where the baronet's sisters condescend to join them.

Phœbe Cardonnel is a little more inclined to be civil to-day than she showed herself at Lancaster Lodge yesterday. She tells Sibyl the names of roses and ferns, and makes herself otherwise agreeable. This amelioration of the young lady's manners has been brought about by a domestic process which Sir Wilford calls "a jolly good setting down."

The baronet has informed his sisters in the plainest language that he considers Miss Faunthorpe the nicest girl he has met for a long time, that he has been informed that she has large expectations from the old Indian beggar, meaning Stephen Trenchard, and that in his, Sir Wilford's opinion, she would suit him admirably for a wife.

Whereupon the two sisters, Phœbe and Lavinia, as with one voice, exclaim in the words of Mrs. Stormont,—

"Wilford! a girl of no family."

"Hang family!" ejaculates Sir Wilford. "We've got pedigree enough and to spare. The needful thing is ready money."

"Oh, Wilford, you are rich enough, surely."

"Oh, I can rub along, if that's what you mean," answers the baronet. "But I could buy the Longley Bottom Estate if I had fifty thousand to dispose of, and then I should be the largest landowner between this and York. There's an upland meadow that would make the finest gallop in England, and you know how badly I want some good training-ground."

"Well, Wilford, if I were the head of the family I wouldn't degrade myself by a plebeian marriage for the sake of a few paltry thousands. You might have Lady Malvina Vielleroche for the asking."

"But I never shall ask," answers Sir Wilford decisively.

"Lady Malvina is a good deal too weedy for my money, and I don't like 'em that colour. I'd marry Miss Faunthorpe if she hadn't a sixpence, but of course I take all the more kindly to the notion on account of that old chap's cash. I shouldn't like to see Longley Manor owned by some three-quarter bred cockney."

The result of this conversation, which took place after dinner yesterday evening, is Phebe Cardonnel's amiable welcome of to-day. She takes Sibyl up to her own room to take off her hat before luncheon, and Sibyl admires the fine old house with its spacious corridors, massive Tudor windows, and innumerable rooms. It is all so different from the formal splendour of Lancaster Lodge. Here all is picturesque, full of old associations, suggestive of ruffs and farthingales, silken hose, and jewelled sword-hilts. There must be a family ghost, of course, in such a house.

"It is a place whose mistress must feel like a queen," thinks Sibyl, as she stands before the carved oak dressing-table, with its old Venice mirror, not quite so convenient as a modern dressing-table, but wondrous stately. From the wide mullioned window she sees the garden and park spreading far away to the summer woods, and woods as well as park and gardens belong to Sir Wilford Cardonnel.

She can but think what a mighty conquest she has made, if Sir Wilford is really in love with her, as she can hardly doubt. She is just a little intoxicated by the idea. She feels as if she had been raised suddenly to a dizzy height, from which she must come toppling down presently. She feels as she has often felt in a dream years ago at Miss Worrie's boarding school, when her slumbers were frequently visited by a vision of pride in which she saw herself wooed by some rich and noble suitor, and from which she awoke at the shrill peal of the school-bell, to find herself in the bleak bare dormitory, with the prospect of a winter day's dreary toil before her.

Luncheon at the How is a bounteous and hospitable meal, in an oak paneled dining-room. After luncheon they explore the old house, which although not a show place, is well worthy that honour. They look at the family pictures, which seem to Sibyl rather a collection of wigs than of faces, so much more distinctive are the wigs than the countenances they embellish. The portrait gallery is, of course, a compendium of the family history, and Sibyl here discovers that the Cardonnels have produced alternate commanders by land and sea, for the protection of their country, and have occasionally blossomed into a judge.

Stephen Trenchard takes his part in the day's proceedings with supreme patience; admires the family portraits just as he admired Sir Wilford's horses; and makes himself generally agreeable. It is only when he is seated in the carriage with his niece that the tension of the bow is relaxed, and weariness overshadows the Anglo-Indian's sallow countenance.

"Rather a long morning, Sibyl," he says, "and more sight-seeing than I care about; but I have borne it all for your sake. It will be a proud day for me if I live to see you mistress of that place. Yes, my dear, one of the proudest days of my life; and yet I have made many a conquest over fortune since I left Redcastle, more than fifty years ago, a gaunt hungry lad—turned my back resolutely on my native town, knowing very well that there was nothing but starvation for me if I stayed there any longer."

Sibyl is silent. It would be cruel to dispel a fancy which evidently gives the old man pleasure. Let him dream on. If what Mrs. Storment says is true—and Stephen Trenchard's strength is dwindling fast,—the end may come before he is awakened from his dream.

"And it will please him better to leave me his money if he thinks that I am going to be a rich baronet's wife," reasons Sibyl within herself. "To add riches to riches is the delight of such men."

CHAPTER XXII.

JENNY'S VISITOR.

ANOTHER blazing July afternoon, and all the cornfields baking under the ripening sunshine. Jenny Faunthorpe lolls in her favourite arm-chair—a dreadfully dilapidated arm-chair it is, with a faded chintz cover which is always grimy—in the surgery window. She is very fond of sitting in the surgery, chiefly because it is against her uncle's household laws—if any man so easy-going and mild as Dr. Faunthorpe can be said to be a law-giver in his household—that she should sit there. It is not an attractive apartment. It is dirtier than any other room in the house, Hester being strictly forbidden to interfere with things in this sacred chamber, or, in other words, to sweep, dust, or scour. Its atmosphere is odoriferous with compound rhubarb pills, colocynth, and pounded aloes. Its counter is sticky with the traces of divers medicines which have been compounded upon it. But there are attractions for Jenny in the room notwithstanding, and she infinitely prefers it to the family parlour. There is the syrup of poppies yonder on the second shelf from the top, in the dusty recess where the spiders have such a good time of it, and Jenny often indulges herself with a few sips of that soporific decoction. If she has a surreptitious novel in her possession she hides it on one of the lower shelves, behind the delf jar of leeches, perhaps. Sometimes she takes the leeches out and plays with them. At other times, when she is quite sure of not being disturbed by Dr. Faunthorpe, she amuses herself by taking down sundry bottles and making up prescriptions of her own. Thus :—

Syrup poppies, 1 oz.
Honey, lots.
Cons. roses, ½ oz.
Peppermint, 1 drachm.
Tamarinds, 2 oz.
Aqua pura, 4 oz.

This afternoon, however, she has a particular reason for preferring the surgery to her usual happy hunting-grounds among the gooseberry bushes. Faithful to her promise to Sibyl, she makes the surgery window her post of observation, so that if the young man she expects should approach by the front door she may be ready to receive him, and cut off all communication with Hester. Should he come to the garden wall, on the other hand, as on his previous visit, there can be no harm done, as the wall adjoining the lane is beyond Hester's ken. With infinite diplomacy Jenny has contrived to get Marion out of the way for the whole day by persuading her to take the train to Krampston and visit her old schoolfellow, Maria Harrison, the Krampston Wesleyan minister's daughter, with whom Marion has kept up some semblance of friendship, although the tastes of the two young ladies are widely at variance, Miss Harrison being, as becomes her, of a serious turn of mind, while Marion is to the last degree frivolous. If there is one thing which Marion enjoys more than another in Maria's society it is the opportunity which it gives her to talk over Sibyl, whose goings on, gay apparel, and chariots and horses, Miss Harrison contemplates with the disapproving eye of the Hebrew prophets. Jeremiah himself did not denounce the foolish daughters of Israel with more vigour than Miss Harrison exhibits towards her old schoolfellow.

Thus it is that whenever Marion is particularly offended with Sibyl she is always in the humour for a visit to Miss Harrison, whose home, though unpretentious in its character, and situated in an obscure by way of the busy port of Krampston, is comfortable in its arrangements, and of a hospitable turn. The five o'clock tea at the minister's table is a plentiful and substantial meal, which makes an excellent substitute for dinner, and renders supper a superfluity.

Jenny, turning to account this idiosyncrasy of her elder sister's, has persuaded Marion that she owes Miss Harrison a visit, and that to-day is a good opportunity for the settlement of that debt. Marion has allowed herself to be persuaded, has put on her best bonnet, and departed for Krampston in the one o'clock train meaning to have a good look at the shops, which means a two hours' perambulation of the principal streets, before proceeding to Miss Harrison's paternal dwelling.

"You needn't expect me till you see me," says Marion at departing. "For if there's an evening service at Little Bethel I shall be obliged to go, though if there are two people in the Scriptures I dislike more than another it's Ahab and Jezebel, and they always crop up in Mr. Harrison's sermons."

Jenny has thus made the coast clear. It is Hester's day for cleaning the kitchen and outhouses, a day upon which the Miss Faunthorpes must either open the door to patient or casual visitor, or encounter Hester's wrath, that faithful servant having a temper which is aggravated by hearth-stoning difficult corners and awkward steps, and exasperated to fever point by scrubbing worm-eaten old floors, which "never do one no credit."

Jenny is quite sure that Hester will not appear till she brings in the tea-tray, scarlet of visage and perspiring, and puts it on the table with a bang and a clatter, exclaiming, "There now, you've got your tea, and don't come worrying for anything else."

It is between three and four—the sleepiest hour in the slumberous balmy day, and Jenny basks in the sunshiny surgery window, with folded arms, watching the wasps and vagabond bees bouncing their stupid heads against the roses in the dusty front garden. It is the very hour in which Sibyl and Mr. Trenchard are returning from the How, and the first day of Jenny's watch.

Just as the old minster clock with its mellow tongue chimes the half-hour a dusty wayfarer comes in sight, and Jenny cries out loud,—

"It's the very man, by all that's wonderful! but dressed like a gentleman this time: and oh, how nice he looks!"

Yes, it is the man she saw in the lane two winters ago, tired, footsore, out at elbows. To-day he is as well clad as any man in Redcastle, and he walks as if he had only come from the station.

He looks about him doubtfully for a minute or so, as if unfamiliar with the front of Dr. Faunthorpe's house, then sees the name upon the brass-plate, and approaches boldly, opens the gate and comes in.

"If Marion or Hester were in the way now it would be all U P," Jenny says to herself.

Before the stranger can ring she has opened the door, and stands face to face with him upon the threshold.

"You're the very person I wanted to see," exclaims Alexis Secretan as Jenny confronts him, her big round eyes staring their hardest; "I'm lucky in finding you in the way."

"Luckier than you know of," thinks Jenny. "Are you a patient?" she demands aloud. "If you are, uncle's out, and you can't have any medicine till after seven o'clock. Between seven and nine in the evening are his hours, or before nine in the morning."

"Nonsense, child! You must remember me, surely."

Jane Faunthorpe's face expresses a total blankness. She shakes her head stolidly.

"Perhaps I look a little more decent to-day than I did one winter afternoon two years and a half ago," says Alexis, with a laugh, "but I'm the man who spoke to you across the garden wall. Do you remember now?"

"I have a faint recollection," replies Jenny, with a languid *hauteur*, which is very fairly imitated from Sibyl. "Come into the surgery, young man, if you please."

Alexis laughs at the mode of address, and follows her down a step into that temple of the healing art.

Jenny enjoys the situation, and means to make the most of it. She looks at the stranger critically, as he drops into one of the frayed horsehair chairs, where parish patients are accustomed to sit awaiting Dr. Faunthorpe's opinion as the fiat of fate—the opinion rarely going beyond the statement that the patient is not so well as he might be, and that his condition will be improved by the medicine which Dr. Faunthorpe is about to give him. If, after this, the patient goes home and dies, it is his look-out. The parish has done all it can for him.

"I want to know all about your sister Sibyl," says Alexis, looking round the shabby room, and thinking that this home of his wife's uncle's is not much better than Mrs. Bonny's one pair front in Dixon Street, Chelsea. "Is she at home?"

Jane shakes her head dolefully, and heaves a sigh which would do credit to an actress of transpontine melodrama.

"I was in hopes you had come to tell us something about her," she says, "for it's a hard thing to have one's eldest sister wandering about the world no one knows where."

"You mean to tell me that you don't know where she is at this present time!" exclaims Alexis.

"That's precisely the fact. She was governessing in Jersey when we heard from her last, but that's full ten months ago, and she's too much of a rolling stone to have stayed as long as that in one place. Especially as she told us that the lady had red hair and used to fly into passions," adds Jenny, with a graphic touch that she thinks will give reality to her narrative.

"What was the lady's name?"

"Mrs. Yokohama Gray," says Jenny on the spur of the moment, reminiscent of the advertisement of a certain dress fabric which she has perused with keenest interest, "Yokohama," repeats Alexis, "that's rather a queer surname."

"Well, it was very *like* that, if not that exactly."

"Jersey," says Alexis, thoughtfully, "when last you heard of your sister she was in Jersey, and that was ten months ago?"

Jenny counts her fingers meditatively, and appears to enter upon an abstruse calculation.

"Exactly ten months," she answers finally.

"Could you show me your sister's letter?"

"It's torn up. Uncle Robert never keeps his letters."

"But is not Dr. Faunthorpe anxious about your sister? It seems such a strange thing for him to be ignorant of her fate."

"Of course it is. But Sibyl's a strange girl. Uncle Robert has had many a sleepless night on her account. I dare say we shall get a letter from her some day, telling us that she has gone with a lady to Peru, or Kamtchatka, or some of those hot climates where mosquitoes devour you all night, and alligators hide themselves under your bolster."

Alexis sighs wearily.

"I should like to see your uncle," he says, "he might tell me more."

"Not a bit of it," replies Jenny, who has posed herself gracefully on a corner of the surgery table and swings her leg to and fro, as if rather admiring the shabby leather boot at the end of it, deficient of every alternate button. "Uncle Robert couldn't tell you a word more than I've told you. In fact, he mightn't tell you quite as much."

"It's hard to be left in the dark like this," says Alexis.

"It's hard upon us, but I can't see that it matters much to you," remarks Jenny. "If you are ever so deeply in love with Sibyl, she isn't so much to you as she is to us."

"Isn't she?" exclaims Alexis. "Suppose I tell you that she is more to me than she is to any one else in the world, and that I am determined not to be kept in ignorance of her present position. She is my wife, Miss Faunthorpe, and the law of the land, as well as the law of God which preceded that law, gives a husband custody of his wife."

"Gracious goodness!" ejaculates Jenny, slipping off the angle of the table, and recovering her equilibrium with a struggle, "do you mean that my sister Sibyl is a married woman?"

"She is my wife. An unfaithful wife, for she deserted me because I was poor. Yet I am weak enough to love her still, and I will go to the end of the world to find her."

"My!" exclaims Jenny. "This is the awfullest thing I ever heard of."

"You can understand therefore that I have some right to make inquiries about your sister, and that I am justified in insisting upon seeing your uncle Robert."

"Oh, but you mustn't," cries Jenny, with overwhelming energy. "You mustn't breathe one syllable about your marriage to uncle Robert. It would be the ruin of all of us if you did. Don't you know that we are no better than paupers dependent upon his charity? He'd turn Marion and me out of doors if he knew that Sibyl had married without his consent. You don't know what a man he is. Our innocence wouldn't help us. He'd wash his hands of the whole lot of us."

"That would be a very vindictive course of action."

"Uncle Robert it vindictive," exclaims Jenny. "He doesn't know what it is to forgive. Do you suppose he'd ever get over Sibyl's ingratitude? He never would, and he'd wreak his vengeance upon unoffending Marion and still more upon unoffending me, for I'm not old enough to go and get married clandestinely, if I wanted to."

"I had no idea your uncle was such a Tartar."

"Sibyl ought to have told you. I thought when a person married a person they always described their relations to that person."

"I had an impression that Dr. Faunthorpe was quite an easy-going little man," says Alexis.

"Ah, Sibyl may have felt it her duty to make the best of him. You see he gives us the bread we eat, and one ought to be thankful for one's daily bread even if it's two days old, and scrapy as to butter. We don't ask for butter in our prayers, you see."

"And you expect me to leave this place without making any further inquiries about my wife?" demanded Alexis.

"What's the use of inquiring when you've had all the information any one can give you here?" asks Jane, with a practical air. "You'd much better go to Jersey and inquire there."

"Yet you say Sibyl is likely to have left Jersey by this time."

"More than likely. She is always fond of change. She may have gone to Calcutta, or St. Petersburg, or Hong Kong, or Scarborough, or anywhere where governesses are wanted. But you might trace her *from* Jersey, you know. It would be a good starting-point."

"You tell me that she has never been home since she first left this place to go to Mrs. Hazleton."

"Never," says Jenny, so resolutely that Alexis ought to know she is telling a falsehood.

"Well, if I can do myself no good by seeing your uncle——"

"And are sure to do us a lot of harm," interjects Jenny.

"I may as well go away without seeing him, and trust to my own wits for finding your sister."

"Decidedly," replies Jenny. "A clever young man like you can't be long at a loss.

"Good-bye, Miss Faunthorpe."

"You'd better call me Jenny, if you're my brother-in-law."

"Good-bye, Jenny; thou hast comforted me marvellous much. I must go and try my luck elsewhere."

"If there was anything in this way I could do for you," says Jenny, waving her hand in the direction of the shelves, "the surgery is at your service. I know the bottles as well as uncle does. Anything from syrup of squills to corrosive supplement. Uncle sends a good deal of that to his parish patients, and I believe it cures them, but I'm not quite sure whether they take it externally or internally."

"There's one little blue bottle up there that might be useful to me," says Alexis, with a touch of bitterness.

He points to a dark blue bottle that stands in a corner by itself on the topmost shelf in a recess by the fireplace, and away from the light. A bottle with a gilt label.

"Gracious!" cries Jenny. "That's prussic acid—deadly poison."

"A short cut out of a man's troubles, Jenny. But I suppose a man who takes that way is something of a poltroon, and I'm not disposed to try it yet awhile. Good-bye, Jenny."

"Good-bye, brother-in-law. I'm really very sorry for you, and I hope things will come right in the end. You may kiss me if you like, as we are such near relatives."

Thus privileged, Alexis imprints a brotherly kiss upon Jane's forehead, and with a final sigh of disappointment departs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WILL FORTUNE NEVER COME WITH BOTH HANDS FULL."

BAFFLED where he had expected to succeed, Alexis Secretan is at a loss what to do next. No doubt of Jenny's truthfulness presents itself to his mind, youthful candour beamed in that open countenance of hers. How could he imagine the craft of the serpent in a child who seemed simple as the sucking dove?

What is he to do? Go to Jersey and hunt for Mrs. Yokohama Gray on the chance of finding Sibyl still with that lady, despite Jenny's assertion of her sister's fickleness? This seemed the most obvious course for him to take, and he loses no time in taking it. The journey from Redcastle in Yorkshire to the Channel Islands is a long one, and it is only on the third day after his interview with Jane Faunthorpe that Alexis finds himself at St. Heliers.

Vain are his inquiries for Mrs. Yokohama Gray, or for any Mrs. Gray with a name approaching Yokohama in sound. He finds a Mrs. Gray pure and simple, but she is a laundress, and certainly not in a position to afford the luxury of a governess for her children. Alexis pursues his inquiry in every quarter likely to afford information. He sees postmasters, lodging-house keepers, librarians and tries to obtain tidings of any lady with a pretty governess residing in the island. Sibyl might be remembered for her pretty face, he thinks, where her name was unknown or forgotten.

All his efforts are vain. He starts upon various false scents, wastes a great deal of time and trouble, and leaves the island at last, thoroughly dispirited.

What more is there for him to do? Nothing assuredly, unless he can extort the secret of his wife's whereabouts from that inflexible young woman, Jane Dimond. It seems such a hard thing to have Sibyl's letter in his pocket, to know that she is within a day's post, and yet not be able to find her. At Southampton, while he is loitering about waiting for the train that is to take him back to London, he remembers that he has or ought to have a kinswoman living in the neighbourhood of Winchester. A maiden lady, his father's first cousin, has lived all her life on a small estate near that cathedral city. He remembers spending a month at Cheswold Grange with his father and mother during one of those rare visits which they made to their native country. He was a child at this time, and it had struck him since that his father must have had some stronger motive than family affection in coming over to England to visit a quiet maiden lady, living in an out-of-the-way village.

His father had possibly some idea of securing Miss Secretan's fortune for himself or his boy. Philip Secretan was assuredly the last of men to degrade himself by courting a wealthy relative, but he may have thought it his duty to his boy to keep on friendly terms with the owner of the only estate remaining to the family.

As years went on Mr. Secretan had grown more indolent in his habits, and less inclined to cross the channel, but one of his farewell injunctions to Alexis when the young man last visited him had reference to Matilda Secretan.

"Go and spend a few days with your cousin Matilda now and then, Alex," said the father. "She was very fond of you when you were a little boy, and I know she'll be pleased to see you now you've grown into a fine young man. It's a quiet, out-of-the-way place for you to visit, but you will be made much of by the old lady, and I dare say you can get a little shooting there in October. Lord Starborough's preserves are close by, and your cousin was always on good terms with her neighbours."

Alexis promised most dutifully, and was always intending to perform; but the visit to Miss Secretan was a business so easy to accomplish that it was deferred indefinitely. Alexis thought it would be a pity to go earlier than October, on account of Lord Starborough's pheasants, and three Octobers came and went without his finding leisure for the visit. Then came the sale of his commission, and he felt he should hardly like to face his cousin Matilda under such awkward circumstances. He would have to explain things, and he hated explanations. Next came his entanglement in Cupid's fatal net, and he had not a spare thought for Miss Secretan. Then followed his marriage and rapid descent in the social scale. He had sore need of a friend in those days; but as he had neglected his cousin Matilda in his brief day of prosperity, he could not approach her in his destitution. He might stoop to ask a favour of aunt Gorsuch, at whose house he had been a familiar guest, but he could not beg of Miss Secretan, to whom he was a stranger. He had a faint recollection of her as an old lady with silvery hair in corkscrew curls, a high nose, delicate peach-bloom cheeks, a slim straight figure, and a dress of rich black silk, like a clergyman's presentation gown. That she had been very kind to him, and that his life had been made particularly pleasant to him at Cheswold Grange, he could remember distinctly. He remembered telling Sibyl about his rich maiden cousin, as they sat by the fire in Dixon Street one November evening, building castles in a brief interval of hopefulness. He had described that childish visit to Cheswold, and his girl-wife had been fascinated by his picture of the pretty English country house and gardens, the meadows, and the trout-stream in which he had made his juvenile attempts at fly-fishing.

"Why shouldn't your cousin leave you her estate, Alex?" Sibyl had said eagerly. "Wouldn't that be a happy thing?"

"A very happy thing, love, but not a likely turn of the wheel by any means," he had answered. "I have never seen my cousin since I was ten years old. Whatever chances I had in that direction have been forfeited by my neglect."

"Upon my word, Alexis, you seem to have delighted in throwing away fortune," Sibyl had answered, with a touch of anger. And after that she had given way to low spirits for the rest of the evening, and had talked of Cheswold Grange as a property that must have come to her husband if he had not wilfully flung away his prospect of inheritance.

To-day Alexis, sorely perplexed which way to turn in the maze of life, is inclined to dwell upon the memory of his boyish pleasures at Cheswold. He is so near the quiet old place, within twenty miles at most. Why should he not go and see Matilda Secretan? He can approach her without degradation now that he is a prosperous, money-earning man. He has no thought of that possible inheritance. It is not in his nature to calculate upon a thing of that kind; but, being so utterly alone in the world just now, he feels that it would do him good to grasp the hand of a relative—to receive kindness and sympathy from one who had known his father and mother.

The train that was to have carried him to London conveys him to Winchester. At the station he is told that Cheswold is three miles from the city, so he determines to walk the distance. It is between four and five in the afternoon when he turns out of the High Street into the quiet country road which is to take him to Cheswold. Light showers have refreshed the verdure, the low water meadows are looking their greenest, and the grassy hills yonder shut out the world beyond this fertile valley, and give a look of security and repose to the landscape, so simply rustic, so thoroughly English in its character. An hour later, and Alexis stands at the entrance to the village churchyard, a turnstile at a corner of the wall. He remembers this very path across the churchyard as a short cut to the Grange; and after nearly twenty years' absence the scene comes back to his memory as vividly as if he had left the place but yesterday. Yes, there stands the old yew tree, whose widely stretching boughs rustle and creak against the window by the pulpit in boisterous weather. No busy work of restoration is going on here. The greenish glass of the old diamond-paned casements has not been exchanged for the brilliant colouring of the modern glass-painter. The rough-cast walls are unchanged.

There is the wooden dial that used to mark the flight of time when he was a boy. There stands the old family tomb, neglected, forgotten, under its ivy shroud.

He lingers by the gate for some few minutes in a contemplative mood, looking dreamily at the well-remembered picture. Then he turns the stile and goes in.

He crosses the churchyard, looking idly at the tombstones on either side the path, and within a few paces of the lych-gate he is brought to a standstill by a tablet that tells him his visit to his cousin has been deferred too long.

A massive granite slab, surmounted by a cross in white marble, bears this inscription:—

In Memory of
MATILDA,
Only Daughter and Heiress of Mark Horatio Secretan,
Who died at Cheswold Grange, August 14th, 186—,
Aged Eighty-two Years.

Matilda Secretan has been dead exactly a year, and the friendly grasp of a kindred hand which Alexis has hoped for is not for him.

"Poor old lady," he sighs. "Well, she has lived her life, and a good long one. An easy, harmless, passionless existence, full of creature comforts and village dignity. She was a great person in Cheswold. Perhaps it is wiser to play at greatness in a rural village than to struggle to be really great amidst the press of men—pleasant to be born and die on one's own estate, to lie in one's shroud in the same room in which one was rocked in one's cradle—to look out with our dying eyes upon the green fields in which we learned to walk, our own fields, not gained by toil or greed, or overreaching our fellow-men, but coming to us naturally as the blossoms come to the apple trees in our orchard. Yes, it must be a peaceful, pleasant life, affording no opportunity for sin. Satan must have a bad time among small landed proprietors. Poor cousin Matilda! I wonder who has come in for her property?"

The Grange lies within ten minutes' walk, just on the outer edge of the village. Alexis crosses the green, with its duck-pond, its groups of ancient elms before the good old village inn, with the "Rising Sun," looking very much like a careful representation of a mustard plaster, swinging from the signpost. A low white house this village inn, with a sloping thatch and a wonderful display of intensely red geraniums in intensely red flower-pots, a perfect blaze of scarlet floriculture

Beyond the green and the "Rising Sun" the road is shaded by fine old timber, and has a secluded look, as if one had strayed unawares into a gentleman's park. The hedgerows are so neatly cut, the grass margin of the road looks as if it had been mowed and rolled. There is a pleasant odour of pine woods. A little further on there comes an opening in the wooded screen, and across a running brook Alexis sees the wide park-like meadow which lies in front of Cheswold Grange. A sunk fence divides the grass land from the old-fashioned Grange garden; and to the left of the long low old house, with its many gables, its dovecotes and bell-turret, lies the orchard, whose treasures are guarded by a thick holly hedge of two centuries' growth.

How well Alexis remembers the house! a hospitable dwelling in the days of his boyhood, but somewhat gloomy of aspect now. Everything has a neglected air. He can see that even at a distance.

"I suppose Miss Secretan's heir despises the old place," he thinks, "and suffers the Grange to go to ruin, while he squanders the revenue of the land in London. I wonder who the fellow is? Some Low Church parson, perhaps, or smooth-tongued doctor, who got to the blind side of cousin Matilda at the last."

He is at the lodge gate by this time. Even the lodge has a decayed air, a broken pane conspicuous in the parlour window, paint blistered, a bit of rotten gutter hanging from an angle of the roof.

"It looks like an Irish squireen's place in the bad old times fifty years ago," thinks Alexis.

The lodgekeeper's wife is spreading out the weekly wash on the sunward side of a quickset hedge, and to this busy housewife Alexis addresses himself.

"You've a pretty place here," he begins, with the casual air of an uninterested stranger. "Pity it shouldn't be kept up a little better."

"Ah, it is a pity," answers the woman, shaking her head over the family linen. "Things was very different in Miss Secretan's time." She says this with the conviction that every one upon earth—the wandering stranger included—must know all about Miss Secretan. They may not have had the honour of that lady's acquaintance, but she must be known to them by reputation as one of the magnates of the land, just as Disraeli and Gladstone are known.

"She was a good mistress?" hazards Alexis.

"Ah," sighs the woman, seeming to wring her hands as she wrings out a garment before unfurling it on the hedge, "few like her. I won't say but what she was near. A lady that wouldn't allow the waste of a candle end, and wore a dress from year's end to year's end—but a silk as might stand alone. And them as is nearest towards theirselves is oftentimes kindest to others. Miss Secretan was a kind friend to many. She could do more kindness with sixpence than some people can do with half a crown. And she left a very pretty property. A pity it should go into Chancery."

"Is it in Chancery?" asks Alexis, warmly interested.

"Well, I can't say as it is azackley, but it's something that way, I believe. You see, Miss Secretan, she makes her will a good twenty year ago, and she leaves all her property to a favourite nephew, or cousin, I'm not certain which, in trust for him if she should die before he came of age, but he was to have it handed over to him clear of everythink if he was past twenty-one. And she never altered that will. She had thoughts of altering it, I've heard Mrs. Bodlow, the housekeeper, say, because of her nephew not paying her the attention she expected; but once having taken a good bit of trouble to make her will, she didn't care about beginning all over again. 'I'll wait,' says she—as I had it from Mrs. Bodlow,—'and I dare say,' she says, 'as one of these odd days,' says she, 'he'll remember me,' she says, 'and come and see me,' says she; 'and if not,' says she, 'I'm hale and hearty still,' she says, 'and there's time enough to alter my will,' says she, which Mrs. Bedlow repeated to me word bitum while she was lying a corpse in that room with the three windows as you may see from here."

Alexis has turned from red to pale and pale to red again during the progress of this prolix relation. The lodgekeeper's wife only pauses for breath ere she pursues her argument.

"So the will was [illegible]," she resumes, "and Miss Secretan didn't so much as trouble herself to find out whether the young man was living or dead; and lo and behold! when the will was made known, the heir was nowheres to be found. I believe the lawyers and such like did all as was proper, and he was advertised to his advantage in the newspapers continual, but he never answered none of the advertisements, which he couldn't have failed to do if he was alive and could write—unless he'd gone out to Horstralyer and turned butcher like that simple-'arted young gentleman as you read of in the newspapers. Howsomedever, there's the property, belonging to no one, as you may say, and things going to ruin. There's one gardener kept to grub about a bit, where there used to be two men and a boy at work constant, and there's a poor 'elpless old woman in the 'ouse, with 'ardly strength to open a shutter and let in a breath of air, so you may guess as the moths are having their free will of the damass curtings and such like."

"You didn't hear the name of the heir," says Alexis, interrogatively.

"Not his chrisen name. His other name was the same as hern. 'I'll have a Secretan to come after me if I can,' she says, and Mrs. Bedlow told me as she believed it was mostly on account of the name as Miss Secretan left that young man the property."

Alexis tries his hardest to still the troubled beating of his heart, tries to persuade himself that it is too soon to feel the flush and pride of sudden unexpected fortune. Matilda Secretan may have had other cousins, or nephews, he tells himself. He is not particularly well posted in the family history, having heard his father prose about his kindred with youth's heedless ear. He tells himself it is too soon to be glad, yet he feels as if he were lord of the soil. He stands within the gate, and he plants his foot firmly on the ground.

"I wonder if I am standing on my own land?" he thinks. "I feel as if there were a glow in the soil that communicates itself to my blood. It is the land that has belonged to my race for three hundred years."

The fact that for the space of a year no one has come forward to claim the property encourages the supposition that he himself is the missing heir.

"Would it be possible for me to see the house?" he inquires, seized with a feverish desire to examine the mansion which may or may not be his.

"I dare say if you was to offer the old lady a trifle, she wouldn't mind letting you see it, sir. She's a little hard of hearing."

"Suppose I offer you five shillings to begin with," suggests Alexis, dropping two half-crowns into the matron's hand. "You might take me up to the house and make things square with the old lady."

The lodgekeeper's face beams all over with delight. "I'm sure I'm much beholden to you, sir. I'll dry my hands directly minute, and step up to the great house with you."

The Grange has been "the great house" at Cheswold for generations.

"Oh, Sibyl," thinks Alexis as he walks along the grassy path under the elms, "if you had only waited for brighter days, how happy we might have been! You abandon me in order to seek fortune, and you don't seem to have won it yet. Fortune falls into my lap unsought."

The fact of his wife's desertion seems harder to him in the face of this sudden turn of fortune's wheel than it has seemed before. That prosperity should come to him thus, and find him a lonely man!

If this estate of Cheswold has been actually left him, shall he lure his wife back to him by a golden bait? Shall he win from his altered fortunes the boon that has been refused to a husband's entreaty? No, a thousand times no. "If she comes back to me ever she shall return to the pauper she abandoned," he tells himself. "She shall come back for love of me her husband, not to be mistress of Cheswold Grange."

Yet how proud he would be, having won her back to her duty, to point to this peaceful old English home, and say, "I am no longer an adventurer and a beggar. All this is ours, and our children's after us!" He has quite made up his mind by this time that he is the missing heir, and that these elms which screen him from the low western sun are his very own.

Cheswold Grange upon this August evening has a mouldy smell, and wears the gloomy and somewhat ghostly aspect of a house whose shutters are for the most part closed against air and sunshine. But it is a good old house notwithstanding. The rooms are large, the staircase is wide and substantial, with fine carved oak balusters, an open gallery above with numerous doors, suggestive of ample accommodation for a family. The quaint old furniture remains just as Miss Secretan left it. Chairs and sofas are carefully shrouded in holland, and the dust lies thick upon the old rosewood tables, the Canton porcelain, and the crystal chandeliers, whose half-burned wax candles shed their light upon the vanished mistress of the Grange.

"Nothing has been touched," says Mrs. Cramp, of the lodge, as she follows Alexis and the old woman in charge from room to room. "Everythink is the same as in Miss Secretan's time, except that when she was living you couldn't have found a grain of dust in the place if you'd offered a five-pound note for it."

After having looked at the house Alexis explores stables and gardens. It is dark by the time his inspection is finished, and he makes up his mind to spend the night at the "Rising Sun" in Cheswold village. He feels attached to the place already.

"Is there much land belonging to the Grange?" he inquires of Mrs. Cramp, the old woman in charge being little more than a dummy, and Mrs. Cramp serving as interpreter.

"I can't say how many acres, sir, though I dare say my husband might know if he was at home. There's Baker's farm, and there's the Hollow farm and the Hill farm—that must be a good bit altogether. Miss Secretan was lady of the manor."

This is pleasant to hear. Alexis gratifies the deaf caretaker with his bounty, and goes back to the gate with Mrs. Cramp, who enlarges upon the beauties of the place, and asks him if he has any idea of taking the property if it should be to let.

"Chancery might just as well let the great house, you see, sir, if it was only for the sake of having it took care of. It would be all the better for the heir if he should come to claim his own. It went to my heart to see things so dusty. And I hope, sir, if you should have any thoughts of the place you'll keep on me and my good man at the lodge. We served Miss Secretan faithful above eleven years."

"I won't displace you, Mrs. Cramp, you may rely on it, if I should ever come to be master of Cheswold Grange. Good night. Oh, by the way," he adds, just as he is turning to go, "do you happen to know the name of Miss Secretan's lawyer?"

"Mr. Scrodgers, of Winchester, sir. Scrodgers and Son it is now."

"Thanks. Good night again."

"He must be thinking of taking the place," muses Mrs. Cramp, "or he wouldn't want to see Mr. Scrodgers."

Alexis finds the "Rising Sun" a comfortable old hostelry of a primitive style. Dinner resolves itself into tea and eggs and bacon, but the eggs and bacon are admirable, the home-made loaf delicious, and the cream-jug which accompanies the teapot suggest a land flowing with milk and honey. The parlour in which the traveller enjoys this homely meal is clean and bright, and adjoins the bar so closely that Alexis can carry on a conversation with the landlord as he takes his refreshment. From this gentleman he hears that Cheswold Grange is one of the nicest little estates in the county, worth fifteen hundred a year at the lowest computation, and that Miss Secretan was a careful old lady, and must have saved money.

"How could she spend much, you see, sir? living in her quiet way, never leaving home from year's end to year's end, growing her own meat, and making her own butter, and having every thing in a ring fence, as you may say. Ah, there'll be a pretty bit of rhino for that young man to come into if they ever find him."

That young man—or the young man who supposes himself to be the heir—feels a thrill of satisfaction at the idea, and is somewhat impatient for to-morrow morning and an interview with Messrs. Scrodgers and Son.

"Do you know much about Mr. Scrodgers of Winchester, the old lady's solicitor?" asks Alexis.

"Not much, sir, I'm happy to say. I keeps aloof from that cattle. Not as I've ever heard any harm of Scrodgers and Son, but they're all tarred with the same brush, to my mind. If you've got a bit of freehold property, they wants you to mortgage it just to give them something to do. If you've got a bit of property to leave, they wants you to throw it into hodge-podge, just to give them the 'andling of it, and if they can get you into Chancery body and bones, they do it, for the good of trade. No lawyers for me, sir, but I believe as lawyers go, Scrodgers and Son are very decent fellows."

Alexis sleeps peacefully that night, better than he has slept since he landed in the port of London, and is closeted with Mr. Scrodgers the elder early next morning, in the quiet front parlour of a substantial old house in a side street in Winchester. The office has a respectable and well-to-do look, and Mr. Scrodgers is white bearded and venerable enough for an abbot. The grave cathedral overshadows his dwelling, and increases the respectability of his surroundings.

Alexis has sent in his card:—

ALEXIS SECRETAN,
Agent for Messrs. Keel & Skrew,
SIDNEY.

The lawyer receives him politely, with a manner that is half friendly, half suspicious.

"May I ask what Mr. Secretan I have the pleasure of addressing?" he inquires, looking at the card.

"I don't quite know how you would wish me to describe myself. I am the son of Philip Secretan, who died at Nice in 1858, and who was first cousin of Miss Secretan of Cheswold Grange. I come to you, Mr. Scrodgers, to inquire about my cousin's will. I have been in Australia for the last two years, acting as agent for a house in the City, and I only became aware of my cousin Matilda's death yesterday evening."

"This is very serious," says Mr. Scrodgers, looking at Alexis as if he should like to convict him as an impostor. "And pray how did you come to hear of Miss Secretan's demise yesterday evening, not having heard of it prior to that time? May I ask how the intelligence reached you finally?"

Mr. Scrodgers rubs his hands complacently after this address, and fixes Alexis with his large gray eyes, which are of the protuberant order.

"The knowledge came to me in the simplest possible manner. I went over to Cheswold intending to pay my cousin a visit, and found her name on a tombstone in the churchyard."

"Are you quite sure, sir, that the fact of Miss Secretan's death did not become known to you in Australia, and did not influence your return to this country?" inquires the lawyer, severely.

"If you think me an impostor, Mr. Scrodgers, I will thank you to say so plainly, and I will take means to establish my identity. This beating about the bush is as insulting to my understanding as it is to my honour."

"This is a very serious business, Mr. Secretan, a good deal more serious than you may suppose. We are entrusted with a great responsibility, sir. If we err it must be on the side of caution."

"You mean that my cousin Matilda left the whole of her property to Alexis Secretan, and you doubt whether I am the man, although I put his name upon my card."

"It would be for you to establish your identity, Mr. Secretan."

"Nothing more easy. My father's solicitors, Messrs. Gull and Sharpe, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, have been familiar with every stage of my existence up to the time when I sold my commission, about five years ago. They hold all family documents—certificates of baptism, and so on. My father was a careless man as to business matters, but he had infinite faith in his lawyers, and he committed all papers of any significance into their charge."

"Messrs. Gull and Sharpe are a most respectable firm," answers Mr. Scrodgers, with a reverential expression of countenance, as if so old-established a firm ought to be spoken of with awe.

"I refer you to them for my identification," says Alexis, "and I shall be obliged if you will let them have a copy of my cousin's will. I shall go to them directly I get back to London, and take all necessary steps under their advice."

"I have not offended you, I hope, Mr. Secretan, by my business-like manner of discussing this question. I had the honour o enjoy Miss Secretan's confidence for many years, and I am naturally——"

"Very naturally—quite proper. Good morning, Mr. Scrodgers. Please lose no time about the copy of my cousin's will."

"The original document is in Doctors' Commons."

"Ah, then, Gull and Sharpe will be able to get me a copy. Good morning."

Alexis leaves the dull old office elate. He knows all that he wanted to know—knows that he is lord of Cheswold Grange; that he need never go back to Australia; that his agency for Keel and Skrew is at an end; that he is an Englishman of landed estate—a gentleman by fortune as he is a gentleman by birth.

He is eager to get to London, if it were only to communicate his good fortune to the friend of his adversity, Richard Plowden.

"Dear old Dick! how glad he will be! He shall have an acre of ferns at Cheswold, and his mother need never let lodgings any more unless she likes."

There is one thought that touches him most deeply,—the thought of the child whose face he has never seen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STARTLING INFORMATION.

Aided by Messrs. Gull and Sharpe, of the Fields, who put all things in train for him, and take him under their parchment wing with affectionate protection, Alexis has no difficulty in proving his right to Cheswold Grange, and all those messuages and tenements and various holdings thereto appertaining. It is a comfortable estate to inherit, for Miss Secretan has been an admirable woman of business, and has managed everything with fostering care which has beautified and enriched all it touched. The land—save five-and-thirty acres of home farm, park-like pasturage all of it—is let on long leases to tenants who are contented with their holdings, and do not grudge labour or money on improvements. The gardens, the house, the stables, need only a little care to restore them to that perfection of elegant precision and graceful order which distinguished them during Miss Secretan's lifetime. Alexis takes a singular mode of restoring things, and one which wins him much favour from the inhabitants of Cheswold and its immediate neighbourhood. He contrives, with considerable trouble to himself, to get back all his cousin's old servants,—the butler or indoor servant, pompous as the ruler over a retinue of powdered footmen, yet with only one small underling in the shape of a knife-boy; Mrs. Bodlow, the cook and housekeeper, who had served Miss Secretan five-and-twenty years; the middle-aged housemaid, who had polished every article of furniture in the low-ceiled bedchambers so often that each had become an object of affection and pride to her; the gardeners, who knew every apple-tree, every plum and peach, nectarine and apricot on the red walls; the coachman, who had driven Miss Secretan about in the old-fashioned barouche, a serviceable vehicle yet, and in the old green pony chaise, and had ultimately subsided into drawing her along the shady lanes in a Bath chair. Alexis feels a pride in restoring the scattered household—in seeing every bit of furniture, every quaint old ornament assume its proper place. How intensely had Matilda Secretan studied the fitness of things before she so placed them—the Chelsea shepherdess at this angle, the Wedgwood teapot on that shelf, that figure of Quin as Falstaff in Bow china to balance Kitty Clive in Worcestershire ware, and so on to the end of the modest collection. Alexis remembers how his childish eyes had gloated on the old china—how those household treasures had seemed to him more beautiful then anything he had ever seen before. He remembers the garden—the broad gravel walk leading to a Dutch summer-house, in red brick, with stained glass windows—the orange trees in square green tubs ranged along the closely shorn grass that had once served as a bowling-green. The place is very dear to him, for it recalls the happiest days of his childhood.

Before the elms in the avenue have quite lost their summer green in the early days of a fine September, Alexis is established at the Grange; the old servants have come back, and everything is in order. Full of delight in his new possessions the master of Cheswold Grange invites Richard Plowden to come and shoot his partridges.

"They are my partridges," he adds, "though they feed on my tenants' corn for the most part. Come and have a pop at them, Dick,"—an invitation which startles Mr. Plowden, who has never fired a gun in his life.

Dick comes to Cheswold Grange, however, and gladly, not to pop at the partridges, but to rejoice in the sight of his old friend and patron, basking in prosperity's sunshine.

"I always felt you must be born to good luck, Captain Secretan——"

"Call me Alex, Dick, or I shall hit you."

"Well, then, Alex. There was something so bright and genial about you. It seemed as if you couldn't long be under a cloud."

"Did it, Dick? The cloudy weather lasted quite long enough though, old fellow, and the clouds are not gone yet. It's a hard thing to have this beautiful place, and not be able to bring my baby boy here, and establish him in the home which is to be his when I am dead and gone."

"Have you told your wife of your altered fortunes?" inquires Dick.

"Not a word. She shall know me only as the pauper she deserted, or I will at best own to the wages of a hard-working clerk. She shall come back to my poverty, Dick, if she and I are ever to be reunited—not to my wealth. How pretty she would look at the head of this table by the way!"

They are lounging over their wine after dinner, the diamond-cut decanters reflected in the polished mahogany as in dark water, golden egg-plums from the western wall, and peaches from the southern, nestling among dark green leaves in heart-shaped dishes of old Derby china.

"Yes, I dare say," says Dick, more inclined to blame than to praise the absent wife.

"You never saw her, Dick. A pity. She is so lovely—a woman created for happiness and prosperity, not for toil and care. And in marrying me she wedded poverty and sorrow. It was very hard for her. I ought to have been more considerate. Can I wonder that she grew weary of the struggle—that she tried to cut the knot that bound her to my misfortunes? Poor child!"

"Poor you, I think, to have wedded such a piece of selfish prettiness," says Dick.

"Don't be hard upon her, Dick. Fortune was too unkind in those days. The outlook was so black. If there had been a glimmer of hope on our horizon she would have stayed with me, I've no doubt. Think of her now, drudging as a governess, hiding her beauty in some back parlour, or second-floor nursery—toiling for a pittance, while I enjoy all the comforts of this dear old place. That's hard to think of, isn't it, old fellow?"

"Merely retributive justice," answers Dick, sturdily. "But are you sure that she is a governess now?"

"I have every reason to suppose so. Her last letter tells me that she is on the high road to fortune—fortune which she and I are to share. Taking this in conjunction with the information I got from her sister, I can only imagine that she is in the employment of some rich person likely to leave her money."

"Rather an ignoble position that," says Dick,—"waiting for dead men's shoes."

Alexis sighs, and pours out another glass of his cousin's well-kept La Rose.

"What are you going to do to find her?" asks Richard.

"I've put the business in the hands of a very clever man in London, to whom my lawyers recommended me. In the abstract I hate the idea of a private inquiry office, but in my particular case I can't get on without one. My man is to find out Sibyl's whereabouts by hook or by crook. Once found, and face to face with her, I don't think I should be long in bringing her to reason. She must have changed very much if she has ceased to love me."

Dick ventures no reply to this. He has a very poor opinion of his friend's wife, thinks her stony-hearted, nay, almost inhuman, and in his idea Alexis Secretan's future happiness would be best secured by Sibyl's being kept at a distance. What could be sweeter than life in this old country-house, among these fertile gardens, these park-like meadows? and why disturb the serenity of the atmosphere by bringing a woman here? The lovelier she is the more trouble she is likely to bring. Was it not Helen's beauty which overturned a world?

Mr. Secretan's new life is assuredly so full of pleasantness, that if it were possible for him to forget the wife he has loved, or to cease from longing for the son he has never seen, he might reasonably take his ease and enjoy the pleasures of a tranquil mind. Cheswold seems to him just one of the most delightful places on the surface of this earth. It is set in a landscape of rural beauty, fertile, luxuriant, like a picture of Constable's. There is plenty of sport, a good pack of foxhounds in the neighbourhood, to which Alexis subscribes liberally. There are pleasant neighbours, who hasten to call upon the inheritor of Cheswold Grange, and are eager to make themselves useful.

Mr. Secretan finds himself received with such peculiar cordiality by fathers and mothers of goodly families of grown-up daughters that he takes an early opportunity to let it be known that he is that worst of detrimentals, a husband without a wife. He tells one of his new friends, in the strictest confidence, that he is temporarily separated from his wife in consequence of some family quarrel, but he hopes for reunion before very long; and in a week everybody within twenty miles of Cheswold knows all about it. The disappointment is rather severe for the parents of marriageable daughters, some of whom have been hanging rather long on hand, like the winter pears on the wall. Mr. Secretan is not a great catch in the matrimonial market, of course. A pretty old house and grounds, and from fifteen hundred to two thousand a year. A very moderate alliance, but a comfortable and respectable one, think the anxious parents. And then [illegible] has always ranked high among her neighbours. There is an odour of sanctity about the Grange.

"A pity the young fellow should have made such a mess of himself," remark the fathers. The mothers go so far as to call it a shame. The daughters feel a sense of loss, and are not quite so amiable to Mr. Secretan the next time he takes them in to dinner.

Old friends whom he knew in his days of youthful extravagance find him out, and rejoice in his restored fortunes. A couple of old brother officers crop up in the neighbourhood. Colonel Churton settled and sobered into a country gentleman, great in the cultivation of mangold and turnips; Major Tollinson, who breeds prize cattle, which help to eat the colonel's roots;—these are full of warmest friendliness.

It seems to Alexis as if he had never been poor. He has spent some of his cousin's accumulated cash in the payment of his debts—debts of honour and tradesmen's bills have alike been repaid, with five per cent. interest in every case. There is now no one living who can say he has lost money by Alexis Secretan.

"What a pleasant feeling it is, Dick!" says Alexis, as he pockets the last receipt, "with respectful thanks." "I really feel as if I had only just reached my proper number of inches, as if I had been half a head shorter than I ought to be for the last six years. There is a springiness in my step, too. Ah, Dick, this is the real worth of money—'the glorious privilege of being independent.'"

Alexis has settled down comfortably in the rooms he has chosen for himself, and begins to feel as if he had lived at the Grange all his life by the time the first frosts sparkle on the grass, and the leaves fall fast from the good old trees, and lie thick in grove and glade, despite of gardeners and wheelbarrows. He has put up new bookshelves in the library, where Miss Secretan's favourite poets and divines, in neat calf or vellum bindings, make but a small appearance, and has filled them with the books he loves, a truly cosmopolitan collection. He has bought himself a couple of clever hunters, and a useful covert hack, which he can also drive in a dogcart. He has shot over the stubbles, and in the preserves of his noble neighbour, Lord Starborough, and has had two or three good runs with the foxhounds. He has made a large circle of new acquaintances, and renewed several old friendships. But in all this time he has had no tidings of Sibyl.

He has, it is true, received numerous letters from the private inquiry office, some promising speedy success, others asking some questions of detail, which might help to confirm a suspicion, or establish its falsehood, some declaring that the inquirer is on the right track. But the result has been failure. So far private inquiry has effected nothing.

Despairing of ever succeeding by this means, Alexis inserts an advertisement, which he means to be his final appeal to his obdurate wife.

"Dixon Street, Chelsea.—I refuse to write to you through the faithful servant in L—— Street. I consider such indirect communication degrading to you and to me. I have no sympathy with your schemes. I decline any share in fortune so won. I claim you by my sacred right as your husband. You need not fear starvation, or even the pinch of poverty. I have obtained employment which will enable me to keep my wife and child in decent comfort. Come back, and be assured of my fondest affection. Prolong our separation, and it may become eternal."

This advertisement is quickly answered by another, beginning with the watchword, Dixon Street.

"Wait and hope. A little patience, and we shall be reunited. You cannot wish for reunion more earnestly than I do. The fabric which has taken more than two years to build must not be destroyed by a moment of impatience."

Alexis inserts a second advertisement.

"Dixon Street.—Give me the custody of our son, and I will be content."

To which the answer is one word—

"Impossible."

On this Mr. Secretan loses temper, and love gives way to resentment.

"Heartless, inexorable!" he says to himself. "She loves money better than she loves me. The sordid desire to inherit some weak-minded old woman's wealth is stronger with her than duty or affection. Is she worth all the pain I have suffered for her? Is she worthy the constancy I have given her?"

The answer to these questions is a decided negative. His love for his wife has been a foolish, unreasoning passion, wasted upon an unworthy object. He now determines to forget that cold and cruel wife, and to enjoy all the pleasures of his new position; and in the various employments and engagements of country life his days glide by smoothly and pleasantly until the approach of Christmas. It is now three years since Sibyl left him. He dines with Colonel Churton one bright frosty evening, just a week before the Christian festival. The colonel's spacious old house, Longley Mead, is full of guests, military and civil, young people, middle-aged people, elderly people, pretty girls, with portly mothers and portlier fathers.

They sit down, about thirty to dinner, in a fine oak-paneled dining-room, and the board is a merry and noisy one. Quiet flirtation is going on doubtless in some quarters under cover of the general talk and laughter, the cross-firing of respectable old jokes, the remarkable anecdotes of horses, dogs, foxes, and birds; the discussion of that last troublesome case at petty sessions, and a good deal more genuine county talk. The banquet is long and splendid; but at last the ice puddings have made their round, the liqueurs have followed in fairy goblets, golden-starred, the hothouse grapes have been admired, and the ladies have left the ruder sex to draw up to the host's end of the long table, and enter upon that serious discussion of the merits of various Burgundies and Bordeaux, which appears to afford so much delight to the masculine mind.

"You used to be a pretty good judge of claret in your time, Secretan," says the colonel, cheerily, "give me your candid opinion of that Margaux."

"About as good a judge of claret as he was of a pretty woman," says Major Tollinson, while Alexis gravely sips the Château Margaux, "and he had a wonderful eye for beauty."

"Oh, come, now," remonstrates the colonel, "Secretan was never a ladies' man. He left that kind of thing to you, Tollinson."

"Oh, I grant that he was too lazy a beggar to play croquet on a blazing July afternoon, or to dance attendance at picnics or tea-fights, or make himself useful at a school feast, carrying baskets of buns and jugs of boiling tea. But he was a great admirer of the sex for all that, and at a county ball he always got the most dances with the prettiest women."

"A nice clean wine," says Alexis, ignoring these remarks.

"Talking of pretty women," says a young man who sits furthest from the host, "I think I had the pleasure of meeting one of the prettiest girls you could ever hope to see, down in Yorkshire the week before last."

The word Yorkshire catches the ear of Alexis. So large a county must needs be rich in female beauty; but he remembers that Redcastle is in Yorkshire, and thinks of Sibyl. Or perhaps it is that instinct which in some moments of our lives warns us that some word vital to our interests is about to be spoken.

"Plenty of pretty women in Yorkshire," says the host, incuriously. "How did you find the grouse this year, Danvers? You were staying somewhere near the moors, I suppose."

"No, I was in rather a poor country for grouse. I was at Mr. Holford's place between Hillsborough and Redcastle."

Alexis grows pale, and refills his glass with a hand that shakes a little.

"May we ask for the beauty's name?" he says.

"She is a Miss Faunthorpe—an heiress, I believe. At least, there's a rich old East Indian party she goes about with, and I conclude she's to have his money, by-and-bye. I met her at a dinner at Sir Wilford Cardonnel's, and the rumour is that Sir Wilford is going to marry her. He's uncommonly sweet upon her, that's a fact patent to the meanest comprehension."

Alexis tries to check the tumultuous beating of his heart, tries to steady himself and compose his countenance, and by a great effort succeeds.

Why should this be his false wife? asks the voice of reason. Sibyl has a grown-up sister whom he has never seen, a sister who may be as lovely as herself, although his wife always disparaged Marion's charms. Or this Miss Faunthorpe may belong to some other family—nay, must so belong, since she is spoken of as an heiress.

"You have roused my warmest interest in this Yorkshire beauty," he says, with assumed languor. "Could you not draw upon your powers so far as to describe her to us?"

"Yes, by all means. Indulge us with a little word-painting; give us a verbal photograph of your beauty," says Colonel Churton.

"Who can describe the indescribable?" exclaims Mr. Danvers, pleased at having made himself the object of general attention, after having languished in the shade during the rest of the entertainment.

"Picture to yourselves ——"

"Oh, come, we want you to do the picturing ——"

"Imagine an oval face framed in dark brown hair, loosely braided—I believe that's the word, isn't it? Hair with a glimmer of gold and a natural ripple, eyes of darkest brown, complexion ivory pale, save when excitement flushes the cheek with a lovely pink, like the inside of those pomegranates; features almost Grecian."

"Sounds rather like a face in a fashion plate," says Major Tollinson. "I'd rather hear of a *retroussé* nose, red hair and freckles, or a tawny little gipsy with murderous black eyes."

"Not to admire Miss Faunthorpe would be to despise perfection," says Mr. Danvers, slightly offended.

"You haven't told us her Christian name," says Alexis.

"It fits her to a nicety, for there is a mystic look about her pale face and dark brown eyes. Her name is Sibyl."

"And she is going to be married to a Yorkshire baronet?"

"Sir Wilford Cardonnel, one of the wealthiest land owners in the West Riding. Mind, I don't say the match is a settled thing. It hasn't been formally announced, you know; people haven't begun to congratulate her; but the marriage is talked of. I dare say the local papers will get hold of it soon. 'We understand,' &c."

"And there is a rich uncle in question?" asks Alexis. He has recovered his self-command by this time, and makes the inquiry with the air of a man who only talks for the sake of keeping up the conversation.

"Yes, a shrivelled old fellow, who eats any amount of Nepaul pepper. An artful old bird! Looks as if he had made his money in slaves, or opium, or something contraband. Sort of man who would have done well in Warren Hastings' time, when John Company had things all his own way in the East."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Let me see—hum—ha—er—er—Travers—no—rather an odd name. Trinder. No. Trenchard. Yes, that's it. Stephen Trenchard. Pretty niece called him sometimes uncle Stephen, sometimes uncle Trenchard "

"Stephen Trenchard," repeats Alexis, staring blankly at the tall epergne in front of him.

This is a shock he was not prepared for. Stephen Trenchard, his father's bitter enemy. The man whose arts disinherited him, Alexis, while yet unborn. The man whom his family religion taught him to execrate. And it was this man's niece—a daughter of this detested race—he had married. It was to court and cherish his father's enemy that his wife had left him.

"This is the fortune she is to inherit and we are to share. This is the scheme of her life. It is for Stephen Trenchard's ill-gotten wealth I am to wait. It is for this I am to be patient and trust her. And she shows herself so true to her trust that common rumour gives her to another man. It is time for me to make an end of this farce of fidelity."

CHAPTER XXV.

TOWN TALK.

Before the close of the next day Alexis is once more in Redcastle. This time, however, he goes straight to the chief inn, or hotel, as it proudly calls itself,—the institution which supports and sustains the languishing spirits of the half-dozen or so of idle young men who adorn Redcastle by their residence. The hotel affords them a porch, or portico, in which to lounge and gossip with one another, or for want of more aristocratic company, with the landlord of the establishment, who appears to have nothing to do, from morn till dewy eve, but stand on his threshold and survey the varieties of life as presented by Below Bar and the market-place, where a pedestrian may be seen to pass once in five minutes, and a vehicle of some description may be reckoned upon once in half an hour. Besides this portico, or school of conversation, which is in a manner a free institution, the "Coach and Horses" furnishes its patrons with a bar in which to imbibe mild admixtures of soda water and brandy, appetising sherry and bitters, or the more economic refreshment of a glass of ale, while two lively barmaids, gifted with a considerable power of repartee, stimulate the native youth to intellectual effort. On one side of the hotel is the billiard-room, where awful contests of skill go on under the shaded lamps, and money is won and lost. On the other side is the reading room, where, besides a variety of useful information in the way of Bradshaw's guides, the county history, almanacks, and time tables, the lounger may enjoy literature as fresh as the day before yesterday's *Evening Standard*, or a *Punch* not quite three weeks old.

At the "Coach and Horses" Alexis deposits his small valise this dark December evening at five o'clock, the universal tea time among the burgesses and lower classes of Redcastle, the witching hour at which Mrs. Stormont and her friends discuss the morals and finances of their neighbours over harlequin cups of orange pekoe. He has come to the hotel in order to draw breath before swooping down upon that false wife of his, and with a view, perhaps to making himself better acquainted with the ground he stands upon. From Mr. Danvers he may have heard something less or something more than the truth. Here, in the place she inhabits, he is likely to make himself acquainted with the best or the worst that men and women can say of her.

He bitterly resents the falsehoods told him by Jenny Faunthorpe nearly six months ago. That instance of juvenile depravity is only a new proof of the bad blood that flows in the veins of the Trenchards. Alexis looks upon it as hereditary vice.

"They are all cold-hearted and false alike," he tells himself. "The man robbed my father of his rights, and wore a smooth face all the time, and pretended to be his friend. The child looks in my face and lies to me. Who could have suspected a child of such a falsehood?"

Being set upon by an elderly waiter, and besought to order his dinner, Mr. Secretan expresses a provoking indifference to that meal. He will have anything they like to give him in an hour's time. A private sitting-room? Yes, by all means, and a good fire. He will go for a walk while his dinner is preparing. And, by the way, which is Mr. Trenchard's house?

"Mr. Trenchard's house? Lancaster Lodge." The waiter mentions it with respect in his tone. "Straight up the street, sir, and through the Bar. It is the third house on your left above Bar. You can't miss it, sir. A noble-looking mansion, with a lodge entrance. One of the finest houses in Redcastle."

Alexis strolls up the street in the winter dusk. Lamps gleam redly behind fanlights. There is a rosy fire-glow on some of the windows. The respectability of the scene strikes the stranger. It is so different from that dilapidated, untidy end of the town in which Dr. Faunthorpe's house is situated.

"So my wife has a rich uncle as well as a poor one; and she came back to her native town to pay her court to the rich man, not to seek a homely shelter with the poor one. And she knew that she was my enemy's niece, and had not candour or courage enough to tell me the truth. It suited her humour better to leave me in a sneaking fashion, and fasten herself on to the wealth of a scoundrel."

So muses the outraged husband as he walks up the street, and under the old Gothic archway. Yes, there is Lancaster Lodge—ponderous, gloomy, looking like a moneyed man's house. There is no gleam of light in the upper windows, and the wall hides the lower. A jail or a reformatory would look more cheerful.

"Is she happy within those walls?" he asks, "or is she like an enchanted princess shut up in a golden prison? She has bartered all things for the hope of wealth—honour, truth, affection—just as her uncle did before her."

He has no mind to lose much time before standing face to face with his wife; but he wishes first to hear what the townspeople have to tell about her. How much truth is there in that rumour of an intended marriage? How much encouragement has she given to her admirer? At the "Coach and Horses" they are likely to be well informed of all the local gossip, and at the "Coach and Horses" he intends to make his inquiries.

He is shown into a sitting-room, spacious enough for a party of twelve, and brilliantly illuminated. The number of glasses, various in colour and shape, which adorn the dinner-table, might be taken to imply that he is expected to drink deeply of the "Coach and Horses" wine.

On receiving his modest order of a pint of claret, the waiter sweeps off champagne and hock glasses in a low-spirited way, and relieves his disappointment with a faint cough.

The dinner is served in very good style, the elderly waiter receiving the dishes at the door from his subordinate, and sliding about the room stealthily, as if he were attending to the wants of a dying traveller, whose ebbing breath he was appointed to watch.

Alexis dawdles over his fish, and dallies with his cutlet and tomato sauce.

"Do you see much of Mr. Trenchard?" he asks.

"Mr. Trenchard, sir? No, sir. Mr. Trenchard is a very reserved kind of gentleman. He is much sought after in Redcastle, and I believe he do attend a good many dinner parties among first-class people; but as to playing billiards in our room downstairs, or taking his glass of wine, or brandy and soda, he is quite the last kind of gentleman. Besides which, one may say that his age precludes that sort of thing, although we have older gentlemen than Mr. Trenchard in our billiard-room. But he has a very fine table of his own, you see, sir; indeed, I may say he drawed off one of our best customers with his table—young Mr. Stormont, which used to come here almost every evening, a poor player, but a genteel young man. Very much taken with Mr. Trenchard's niece he is, but there's not much hope for him in that quarter," adds the waiter, as he lowers the cover on the cutlet dish, with a twirl of his arm like a movement in the broadsword exercise.

"Why not?" asks Alexis.

"Because the young lady looks higher, sir; as well she may, seeing that Mr. Frederick Stormont hasn't one sixpence to rub against another, as the saying is. Miss Faunthorpe is a beauty, sir—a regular beauty; and she's been told of it often enough, I'll lay, to know how to set a right value on herself. And then the old gentleman's sure to leave her his money. He's adopted her, you see, sir. There's other nieces down town, but this one's his fancy, and he's adopted her. Everybody knows she's to come into all his money. And now they say Sir Wilford Cardonnel's going to marry her, and she'll hold her head as high as any in the West Riding, for there isn't a finer gentleman than Sir Wilford between here and York."

"Who says that she is to be married to Sir Wilford?"

"Everybody, sir, it's town talk. There's been plenty said about it downstairs in the billiard-room. They've chaffed young Mr.] Stormont about it, and he do look uncommon miserable, poor young gentleman, when they go on at him, and tell him he's missed his chance with Miss Faunthorpe. 'And if you don't marry an heiress, whatever are you to do to get your living, Fred?' says they. 'Blest if I know,' says he. 'I'll tell you what, Fred,' says Mr. Staples, the Vet, 'you'll have to eat that horse of yours, or he'll have to eat you. It'll come to that sooner or later, for you'll never be able to keep him.' 'I'm afraid it will,' answers Mr. Stormont, as meek as a lamb."

Alexis is not warmly interested in the impression which Sibyl's intended marriage—or the rumour of such an intention—may have made upon Frederick Stormont. He is more concerned in its effect upon himself.

"And pray what kind of man is this Stephen Trenchard?" he asks presently. "Is he liked in your town?"

"I don't know about liking," replies the waiter, dubiously; "the townspeople would hardly go to take such a liberty. He's very much looked up to."

"Does he or the young lady—this pretty niece of his—do much good in the place?"

"Mr. Trenchard subscribes to our local charities, sir. Good, in the sense of districk visiting, or Sunday school teaching, or anything in that line, the young lady does not do. Her position raises her above that, you see, sir."

"I understand. Active benevolence of that kind occupies a lower level."

"Decidedly, sir. Young persons who have less call upon their time can naturally devote themselves to school teaching and such like. Miss Faunthorpe moves in the highest society—she visits a great deal. It would be quite out of the question——"

"That she should trouble herself about the welfare of her inferior fellow-creatures. Of course. Well, I'll go and call at Lancaster Lodge. It's rather late; but as a traveller I may be excused that informality."

"You know Mr. Trenchard, sir?" exclaims the waiter, alarmed lest he should not have expressed himself carefully enough about that great man, although he has echoed those accents of adulation which prevail in Redcastle whenever Stephen Trenchard is mentioned.

"My father knew him—intimately," replies Alexis.

It is between seven and eight when he rings the bell at the lodge gate of Mr. Trenchard's mansion, a fine winter's night. The stars are shining on lawn and plane-trees, shrubbery and empty flower-beds, as the lodgekeeper shows Mr. Secretan the way to the solemn pillared doorway.

Here a footman in livery, warned by the lodge-keeper's bell, receives the stranger. Very silent is the lamplit hall, where a bust of Wellington, on a porphyry pedestal, keeps company with a bust of Pitt the younger, on a column of malachite. Crimson cloth curtains hang before the tall doors, and keep the draught from the chilly East Indian.

"Is Mr. Trenchard at home?" asks Alexis, "and can I see him on particular business?"

He has come to this house determined to keep no bounds—to exercise a husband's authority to the uttermost, if that stretch of power be needed—to claim his wife from his father's deadliest foe, Stephen Trenchard. Scarcely worth the claiming, perhaps, with that false blood in her veins. But some remnant of the old faithful love still lingers in his breast. If she will come back to him—if she will surrender all hope of her uncle's ill-gotten wealth, and come back to him, believing him still one of the humble toilers in life's great hive, he will take her back to his heart of hearts, and cherish her for all his life to come.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BETWEEN LOVE AND GOLD.

THE footman surveys the stranger doubtfully, and rings a bell to summon Podmore the butler, feeling unequal to cope single-handed with this eruption of an unknown visitor at eight o'clock in the evening.

"Mr. Trenchard is not very well, sir. He is confined to his room, in fact; but if your business is anything important——"

Here Podmore comes to the subordinate's relief. He enters on the scene with a stately slowness, breathing heavily, having just been awakened from the pleasant slumber of repletion in front of the fire in the servants' hall, where buttered toast, eggs and ham, the daily papers, and a quiet game at cribbage are his evening solace.

"Mr. Trenchard is indisposed, sir," he observes, severely, as if the stranger ought to have been aware of the fact; "but if you wish I can carry him a message." The intruder looks like a gentleman, and Podmore remembers that other mysterious visitor of last summer, who came and went like the wind, no one knowing whence or whither.

"If Miss Faunthorpe is at home and will see me, I need not trouble Mr. Trenchard," replies Alexis after a moment's consideration. "Be kind enough to give her my card."

Podmore stifles a yawn and receives the card on a salver, which he takes from the hall table, and carries into the drawing-room, where Sibyl is sitting in solitary grandeur dreaming over a volume of Tennyson.

"A gentleman, ma'am, wishes to see Mr. Trenchard, but I told him my master was indisposed. Would you favour him with a few minutes' conversation, ma'am?"

"Is that the gentleman's card?" inquires Sibyl, languidly.

"Yes, ma'am."

Sibyl takes up the morsel of pasteboard with the tips of her fingers, and that elegant air of listlessness which is so provoking to Marion. She looks at the name a little curiously, notwithstanding her languor, for it strikes her suddenly that this visitor of to-night may be her uncle's mysterious guest of the race night. One glance at the card shows her the name of all others most appalling to her, and yet there is, in that first moment of surprise, a thrill of rapture in the thought that the one man she loves is near her.

"Where is he?" she cries, starting up from her easy chair with a display of animation that awakens Podmore's suspicions.

"In the 'all, ma'am. Shall I show him in?"

"Certainly."

"How fortunate that uncle Trenchard should be out of the way to-night!" thinks Sibyl, too bewildered by the one startling fact of her husband's coming to be able to take in at a glance all the consequences of such an event.

Stephen Trenchard has been slightly ailing during the last week, and has kept himself hermetically sealed, as it were, against east winds in the seclusion of his bedchamber. He has suffered from such trifling indispositions, touches of cold and rheumatism, several times during the late autumn and early winter, and Mrs. Stormont is confirmed in her opinion that dear Mr. Trenchard is breaking fast, or, as the colonel puts it, in the friendly gossip across the walnuts and the wine, "there can be no doubt the old fellow is going off the hooks."

Podmore ushers Mr. Secretan into the drawing-room and retires, leaving husband and wife standing some yards apart, face to face.

Yes, there she stands. The wife lost so long, regretted so bitterly—there she stands, unchanged by care or sorrow, far lovelier than when he saw her last with the pinch of poverty on her cheek, and the wan pallor of care tarnishing the ivory whiteness of her complexion. She stands before him to-night the focus of all that is fairest in the luxurious room: amid all the upholsterer's gilding and colour she is the brightest spot. She is pale as marble, but the large dark eyes shine with a vivid light as she stretches out her hands to Alexis, as if in fondest welcome.

"Alex!" she cried, "Alex! you have found me, in spite of all my care—found me too soon."

She is ready to throw herself upon his breast and pour out her pent-up love in sobs and kisses, but his countenance does not invite this gush of feeling. He surveys her with a look in which there is more contempt than anger. "Yes, I have found you," he says; "found you in the comfortable nest which you discovered for yourself when you turned your back upon starvation and me;—found you in the house of my father's deadly enemy—of mine—for before I could speak plainly I had learned to hate him;—yes, Mrs. Secretan, I have found you, and the clue to your mystery."

"Alexis, you are too cruel. It was for your sake as much as for my own I came here. Yes, as Heaven hears and judges me, I thought of your happiness as much as of my own. Why should we both starve, when there was my uncle's fortune waiting for me to claim my share of it? I knew that he was an old man—that we could not have many years to wait."

"And you left me to think you false, dishonoured, or dead, while you played out this paltry game of waiting for a dead man's shoes."

"I spoke as plainly as I dared in my farewell letter. I was obliged to act secretly, knowing your prejudice against my uncle."

"Don't give my sentiment so mild a name. It is hatred—or at best a sovereign contempt."

"He has been so good to me, Alexis," pleads Sibyl.

"No doubt. Vipers and scorpions and other noxious reptiles are kindly to their offspring, I dare say. You are of his own treacherous blood. There is sympathy between you."

"Alexis, how can you be so cruel? Did you come here only to torture me?"

"I came here to discover whether you are my wife or no. I came to offer you your choice between Mr. Trenchard's fortune —a fortune founded on treachery, remember—and my love. I am ready to forgive all I have suffered at your hands,—your desertion of me in my bitterest need, my suspense and pain of these three years past—if you will place your hand in mine to-night, and leave this hateful house, and abandon all hope of profiting by its master's bounty."

"And my uncle is dying, perhaps," Sibyl thinks despairingly. "In a few weeks I might inherit his fortune."

"The choice is simple," says Alexis. "You cannot have much difficulty in deciding either way. On one side your uncle's garnered wealth, a million perhaps, there is no limit to the opportunities of a man who begins unscrupulously. On the other side my affection, a husband you once pretended to love——"

"Pretended! Oh, Alexis, what more real than my love? When have I ever ceased to love you? If you could only know——"

"I know nothing except that after three years' severance I find you here, my enemy's adopted daughter, the centre of all those fine things which women of small minds value. I ask you, as many a man has asked many a woman before to-day, to leave all unreservedly for my sake. I do not ask you to return to starvation remember, or to the genteel adventurer's hand-to-mouth existence. I have learned to earn my daily bread. The pinch of poverty need touch you no more."

"Not till health fails you, or we grow old," returns Sibyl. "I know what the workers for their daily bread have to look forward to when that day comes. The workhouse or the river. Alexis, for pity's sake, be reasonable. If my uncle Trenchard's fortune was founded on money that ought to have been your father's—he makes the story tell against your father, mind—so much the more reason that it should come to you and me when he is dead. He is past seventy, and his health has been failing during the last few months. He cannot live much longer, and I am as certain as I can be of anything that he means to leave me the bulk of his fortune. Why should I throw away such a chance?"

"Simply because money so obtained would be odious to me, as it should be to you. You are as false to Stephen Trenchard as you have been to me. Your presence in this house is a fraud, Do you think your uncle would leave his money to the wife of Philip Secretan's son?"

"Perhaps not," falters Sibyl. "But for his money to come back to you would be an act of restitution. Providence works in that way sometimes."

"Providence never works through lies and hypocrisies. I want none of Stephen Trenchard's money; all of it tainted with fraud and lying, I'll warrant. I want you, the penniless girl I married four years ago. I had no thought of fortune when I asked you to be my wife, Sibyl. I have no thought of a fortune now."

"No, Alex. You were always reckless, and your recklessness brought us to the threshold of starvation, and would bring us there again, no doubt, if I let you have your way."

"That means you are not coming with me. You hold by your rich uncle in preference to your husband."

"Alex, I love you with all my heart. You are never absent from my thoughts; the hope of our reunion is the one hope that brightens my life."

"I will believe that if you put your hand in mine and say, 'I am yours, husband, come weal or woe.' I might claim you by law, remember—claim you as my chattel. But I am too proud to do that. You must follow me freely or not at all. You shall have your choice."

"In a few months my uncle may be dead. I will come to you then."

"I will not have you then, neither you nor your ill-gotten wealth. Revel in it, fatten on it, but you shall be no wife of mine unless you leave this house with me to-night."

"It would be too great a folly to abandon every chance when success seems so near."

"You decide for the rich uncle?"

"Alex!" cries Sibyl, wringing her hands, "how can you be so cruel to me? Can't you understand that it is for your sake as much as for my own that I want to be rich?"

"I cannot, for I have told you plainly that I despise wealth so won. I see you have made your choice, and I have now only one thing more to settle before I leave you to the fulfilment of your destiny. What have you done with our child?"

"He is in safe keeping."

"I can believe that, but it is not quite enough. I want the custody of him."

"How could you take care of so young a child—a boy of scarcely three years old?"

"I would take excellent care of him."

"He would be a burden to you."

"I should not think him a burden."

"Alexis!" exclaimed Sibyl, bursting into tears. "I have deceived you. I did not like to tell you the truth. Our boy is dead. He died within a week of his birth."

"Heartless woman! you have fooled me with a false hope. I have built all my schemes of future happiness upon that child, and now you tell me he is dead. Which am I to believe, your letter or your assertion of his death?"

"I have no motive for deceiving you in this matter. You offer to take the charge of him off my hands. If he had lived I should be glad to accept such an offer."

"Perhaps, for you who have so little of a wife's affection cannot have much of the maternal instinct."

"Alexis!" she cries, despairingly.

She runs to him and throws herself into his arms, and sobs upon his breast, distracted between love and ambition. The glittering prize seems too near for her to let it go. She cannot bring herself to say farewell fortune, welcome love. She clings to her husband as if she could not part with him, yet means all the while to be steadfast in her devotion to Stephen Trenchard and his money.

"Alexis, if you would only be patient! Let me stay with my uncle to the end. It is not far off. Every one tells me he has not long to live. Trust in my devotion to you, my fidelity."

"Yes, trust in your devotion, your fidelity, while the town gossips are busy with the rumour of your approaching marriage with Sir Wilford Cardonnel."

"The merest folly. Sir Wilford has done me the honour to admire me, and my uncle has given him some little encouragement. You have nothing to fear from such a rival, Alexis, or from any rival. My heart belongs to you. My love has never wavered."

"And as a proof of this unwavering love you refuse to leave this house, all this crimson satin and gilding, for the humble home which I can offer you."

"I refuse to throw away a fortune which only a lunatic would consent to sacrifice," replies Sibyl, with a touch of impatience.

The worthy Podmore enters at this juncture to replenish the fire. He approaches the hearth with slow and ponderous steps, taking note of all he sees on his passage, Sibyl's agitated, tear-stained face, her visitor's pale and angry looks.

"Good-bye, Miss Faunthorpe," says Alexis, while the butler is doctoring the fire with deliberate care, as if every flame were a precious life in danger of extinction. "I think I have explained all I wish you to convey to your uncle."

"Yes," she falters.

"Good night."

"Good night. Are you going to leave Redcastle soon?"

"By the first train to-morrow morning."

"Good-bye."

She would give much to say more—to entreat him once again to be patient and to look forward to their reunion later—to accept her by-and-bye, burdened with the weight of Stephen Trenchard's wealth. But the astute Podmore, having heard the note of leave-taking, waits to show the visitor out, and Alexis is presently escorted to the hall door as if by the warder of a prison.

He goes out of that house well-nigh heart-broken, though pride has enabled him to bear himself quietly enough, and even to make light of his disappointment.

"I loved her so well that it is hard to find her worthless," he tells himself. "Not one spark of generous feeling—all sordid greed of gain. Had I told her of my altered fortunes she would have come to me. Yes, she might, perhaps, have surrendered Stephen Trenchard's larger wealth. But I thank God I had resolution enough to keep that secret. And so good-bye my dream of domestic life, my hope of an heir to inherit my name. I stand alone henceforth, wifeless with a wife, childless though a child has been born to me, whose baby face I was not permitted to see."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SIR WILFORD HAS HIS OWN WAY.

When her husband is gone, and the full significance of that meeting and parting comes home to her, Sibyl feels as if all the hope and glory of her life were departed with him. She does not repent her decision. Were Alexis to offer her the same choice again she would decide in exactly the same manner. In her limited way of looking at the question there is no possibility of arriving at any other determination. It would seem to her utterly unreasonable, an act of absolute lunacy to throw away a fortune which is ready to drop into her lap, for which she has waited patiently, living her false life, suppressing the truer instincts of her heart and mind for nearly three years. She wonders that a man of the world can demand such a sacrifice, can cling to so foolish a prejudice as hereditary hatred, and even carry that passion so far as to hate his enemy's money. To her mind the inheritance of Stephen Trenchard's fortune by Alexis Secretan's wife appears a wise and beneficent settlement of an old debt. No doubt her uncle Stephen was right, and that Philip Secretan was a spendthrift who deserved to be disinherited. His father's fortune held over, quadrupled, increased tenfold perhaps, in Stephen's prudent hands, would pass to Alexis, and justice would be done to the dead father through the living son.

Sibyl cannot believe that Alexis will be obdurate when the hour of her freedom comes with Stephen Trenchard's death.

"No, I will not despair," she says to herself, drying her tearful eyes, and looking at her white face in the glass over the low marble chimney-piece. "Cruel as he was to-night, he loves me too well to repudiate me by-and-bye when I am free to return to him. Poor fellow! How could he reject fortune if it were mine to give him: he, who has suffered the sharp stings of poverty, and who has to work for his daily bread? How could he turn his back upon the bright new life that would lie before us if my uncle's money were mine—not life within the four walls of a handsome dungeon, like this house, but life wherever earth is loveliest—in Paris, in Italy, sailing in our yacht on the Mediterranean, free as birds, without a care or a thought except how to get the most pleasure out of our youth and wealth and freedom?"

Comforted by reflections like these, Sibyl calms herself, and prepares to continue her part of ministering angel to Stephen Trenchard. Illness makes the old man irritable, and the character is not the easiest in the world to perform.

She trembles at the thought of what would happen if her uncle and her husband were to meet—of what might have happened this very evening but for Mr. Trenchard's most fortunate indisposition. What limit would there be to the old man's fury if he were to discover that he had been cheated of his affection—that the niece he had loved and favoured was the wife of his enemy's son? That revelation would have destroyed her hopes, beggared her of that golden chance which seems to her scarcely less than the actual possession of his fortune.

She has no easy part to play this evening when she goes up to her uncle's room, and finds him sitting by his fire awake and watchful—the *Times* lying uncut on the little table beside his capacious arm-chair.

"What have you been doing all the evening, child?" he asks testily. "I've been waiting for you to read me the City article—waiting upwards of an hour by that clock," he adds, with a glance at the gilded timepiece on the mantel shelf.

"I'm so sorry, dear uncle. I thought you were asleep."

"You might have taken the trouble to come and ascertain the fact. I have not closed my eyes since Polmore brought me my beef tea. Who is this gentleman, pray, who has detained you so long?"

Sibyl is unprepared for this question. She had hoped her uncle would have known nothing about that untimely visitor.

"A gentleman, uncle?"

"Yes. Podmore told me you had a gentleman with you. Some one who wanted to see me on particular business, and, being told that I was ill, asked to see you instead. What did the fellow want?"

"He wanted you to subscribe to a fund for building a new church at Krampston, uncle," replies Sibyl, with a desperate plunge. Some lie she must needs invent, no matter what shape it took. "Some new sect, if I understood him rightly. I told him I did not think you would care to subscribe, but that he might call again, if he liked, when you are well."

"Humph! You might have given him a decided negative at once. There are churches enough in the world, and new sects enough, without my squandering money on the fools who want more. The fellow was with you a long time. Why couldn't you get rid of him sooner?"

"He insisted upon showing me plans, and a list of subscribers, and he told me a good deal about the church."

"You ought to know how to keep such fellows at a distance. Some swindler, no doubt. And he was with you nearly an hour, according to Podmore."

"Shall I read you the City article, uncle Trenchard?" asks Sibyl, anxious to end this embarrassing discussion.

She seats herself a little way behind Mr. Trenchard's chair, well in the shadow.

"Yes, you can read, but come nearer the lamp, child; it makes me uncomfortable to know that you are straining your eyes in the dark there."

Sibyl obeys reluctantly, fearing that the traces of agitation may still disfigure her countenance. Luckily, the lamp has a velvet shade which casts the light on the paper in her hand, and not on the face bending over it.

Mr. Trenchard scans her curiously, notwithstanding. His suspicions have been aroused by that evening visitor—a handsome young man, according to Podmore, a lover, perhaps, and that story of the Krampston Church all a fable. Mr. Trenchard has employed too much fiction in the course of his own career to be easily deluded by a figment of the female brain.

He says nothing, however, content to suspect, and to keep his suspicions to himself for the present.

He languishes for some days more under the burden of what Dr. Mitsand calls a slight bronchial attack, and in about a week is able to come downstairs again, and seems almost as active and alert as ever, Sibyl thinks, wondering whether there is really any foundation for that idea about his "breaking up."

Dr. Mitsand is Mr. Trenchard's medical attendant. It is not to be supposed that the precious life of a millionaire could be trusted to poor little Dr. Faunthorpe, who has the care of the parish, and goes his rounds in a positively disreputable pony carriage. Dr. Mitsand's neat single brougham and fine pair of bay cobs are a standing evidence of his respectability and his skill. If he were not a clever doctor how could he afford those cobs?

"Wonderful constitution, your uncle's, Miss Faunthorpe," says Dr. Mitsand, cheerily, on the occasion of his last professional visit. "Quite set up again, you see, complexion clearer, eye brighter, liver in better order. I congratulate you upon having an uncle who ought to live as long as Lyndhurst or Brougham."

Sibyl tries to look glad, but her heart sinks at the thought that this fine constitution of her uncle's places the hope of reunion with Alexis very far off.

"What a miserable situation mine must be when such horrid thoughts are forced upon me!" she reflects. "I almost wish I were Marion, dawdling away life in that old house at the bottom of the town, without a care."

Sibyl's cares are rendered heavier just at this time by the marked attentions of Sir Wilford Cardonnel, attentions which, however delightful they might be to her vanity in the beginning of things, have now become hateful to her, the more so as her uncle will not allow her any way of escape from this entanglement. She sees before her the inevitable end in a proposal from Sir Wilford, and her rejection of it, which act of seeming idiocy will doubtless provoke her uncle's anger, perhaps forfeit his good graces for ever; and then all her patience, all her pretty little flatteries and gentle ministerings to an irritable old man will have been wasted. She will have grieved and offended her husband, perhaps alienated his affections—for nothing. She will be bankrupt both ways. These possibilities occur to her mind sometimes. Difficulties crowd upon her and hem her in on every side. The dread of Sir Wilford taking that decisive step, which he evidently intends to take sooner or later, is always before her; and she has another ever-present fear in the thought that Alexis may reappear at any moment, and reveal himself to Stephen Trenchard. There are hours of her life in which she feels sorely tempted to run away from wealth as she ran away from poverty; and it is possible that if she had known where to find her husband she would have acted upon this impulse. But he has vanished out of her existence. In the fear and confusion of that brief visit of his she did not even ask his place of abode or mode of life.

Prudence and that deep-rooted worship of wealth which is sometimes engendered by a long apprenticeship to poverty keeps Sibyl constant to the rack of her daily difficulties, despite these occasional longings for escape. She contrives by a certain distance of manner, which is in no wise ungracious, to defer Sir Wilford's declaration of his passion. The bluff and genial baronet is as shy as a girl in the presence of the woman he loves, and so long as he can enjoy Sibyl's society, is in no hurry to precipitate matters. Small as are the tokens of favour which she has bestowed upon him, Sir Wilford has no apprehension of being refused by her when it shall please him to ask the fateful question. He is too good a match for the possibility of a refusal. It does not enter into his notion of possibilities that he, Sir Wilford Cardonnel, of The How, could be rejected by any woman out of the peerage. He is kept at a distance by Sibyl's coldness, but in no wise disheartened.

"I'm in no hurry, you know," he says to himself. "I like to know something about a woman before I ask her to be my wife. I should like to make sure she cared a little about me, in a quiet way. So many women have thrown themselves at my head, that I like this one all the better for not going so fast. More likely to be a good stayer, I should think. I don't want to win with a rush. I'd rather take my time and come in quietly." Thus muses Sir Wilford in the solitude of his study—a room chiefly devoted to treatises on the turf and farriery, whips, single sticks, gloves, favourite bits and bridles, a small menagerie of stuffed dogs, from Sebastian, the favourite old hound, defunct at a ripe old age, blind of one eye, and short of one ear, to Mite, the smallest terrier ever seen in the West Riding, a minute white animal, with pointed pink paws and a strong likeness to a rat.

"I ought to see more of her," thinks Sir Wilford. "It's no use asking her and the old party to dinner, or dining with them. I shall never make the running that way. I feel as strange with her when I haven't seen her for a week or two as if I'd only just been introduced to her. It's like beginning our acquaintance over again. I must make Phœbe ask them here to stay. That'll be the best plan. A week in the same house with her will show me what kind of girl she is, better than a twelvemonth's morning calling and dining."

And having made up his mind, Sir Wilford is not slow to act upon his decision.

"Hi, Jess, old lady," he calls to his favourite, a splendid red setter, graceful and ladylike enough in her habits to be admitted as a house dog, though not without protest from Phœbe. Jess vanquishes Miss Cardonnel's objections by pretending to adore her, is as artful as a court favourite, and has as many perquisites.

Sir Wilford goes straight to the morning-room, where his two sisters employ themselves industriously between breakfast and luncheon, writing innumerable letters, examining the housekeeper's weekly accounts, the head gardener's book, and other household volumes, working point lace, practising classical sonatas which reduce them to the verge of lunacy, and making winter clothing for their various pensioners.

Christmas is just over, and the Christmas gaieties and benevolences done with. It is the beginning of the New Year—fine healthy weather—the ground not too hard for horses or hounds, and Sir Wilford in good humour with the arrangement of things.

"Well, Phœbe, what people are you going to ask for Tilberry steeplechase?" he inquires, as Miss Cardonnel looks up from her desk, where she is just declaring herself to remain her dearest Cecilia's ever affectionate friend—Cecilia being the fifth dearest friend she has addressed this morning.

Tilberry steeplechase is an important fixture in this part of the world. It is a race at which gentlemen jockeys disport themselves. It comes in the winter, when outdoor amusements are rare. Altogether Tilberry steeplechase is a benefaction.

"I've written the last of my invitations this morning," replies Phœbe, who is somewhat inclined to forget that she is prime minister and not the king, and to commit herself to important measures without the preliminary formula of consultation with her sovereign. "I have asked General and Mrs. McTower and Belinda—the eldest, you know;—and I thought we ought to be civil to the Vicar of Redcastle for once in a way, so I've asked Mr. and Mrs. Chasubel and the son. He won't make much difference, and you can put him in the barracks."

The barracks is a range of small bedrooms over the offices, devoted to bachelor visitors of indistinction.

"Very well; I've no objection to the Chasubels. Who else?"

"The Radnors, and the Vernons, and Cecilia Hawtree."

"Too many women," says Sir Wilford.

"Cecilia is my particular friend," remarks Miss Cardonnel, with dignity.

"Oh, well, let her come."

"She is coming the day after to-morrow," observes Miss Cardonnel. "I have just written to say I shall send the omnibus to meet her."

"What the dooce can one young woman want with a family bus, built to carry ten?" exclaims Sir Wilford.

"She will have her maid," replies Miss Cardonnel, "and her portmanteaux."

"Ah, boxes enough to load a goods train, I dare say," mutters Sir Wilford. "Well, that's all your list, I suppose?"

"Yes, Wilford."

"Then I'll give you mine."

"Do you want to ask any one else?" exclaims Miss Cardonnel, with an injured air. "I fancied I had thought of every one you would have cared about asking."

"You've thought of a good many I don't care about."

"But, my dear Wilford, I don't see how I can possibly ask any more. I've filled all the best bed-rooms."

"Then you must empty some of them. I want you to ask Colonel and Mrs. Stormont, and that son of their's on the gray."

"But, Wilford, Mrs. Stormont is such a horrid old person—so pushing."

"Never mind that. We often have horrid old persons."

"And the son,—I don't know what he's like off that gray, but he's utterly odious on it."

"Stupid young cad, rather, but good fun. Be sure you tell him to bring the gray."

"Why should we have the Stormonts to stay with us, Wilford?" demands Lavinia, the younger sister, looking up from an easel, upon which she has been copying a drawing-master's landscape, and fondly deluding herself with the idea that she can paint. "It's all very well to ask them to dinner once in a way, or to a garden party, but why have them in the house?"

"Simply because I wish it, Vinnie. I don't often indulge in whims. Say that this is one, if you like."

"Oh, of course, if you really wish it. But I think it's rather a dangerous precedent," replies Phœbe. "All the Redcastle people will be expecting to be asked to stay here."

"The butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers. Well, they can go down to their graves in a state of expectation," says Sir Wilford, "and now Phœbe, I want you to write a particularly nice letter—cordial, and all that kind of thing, you know—to Miss Faunthorpe, asking her and Mr. Trenchard over for the race week."

"I ought to have known what was coming," exclaims Phœbe.

"Well, naturally, I shouldn't be civil to the Stormonts without a motive. Mrs. Stormont introduced me to Miss Faunthorpe, you see, and I shouldn't like the old lady to think I'd make a cat's-paw of her."

Phœbe is inwardly rebellious, but too wise to revolt outwardly. She has seen the sun set on her twenty-ninth birthday, and has been mistress of the How, the sole and sovereign domestic power, for the last ten years. It will be a hard thing, to lay down her sceptre, to retire from that lordly dwelling-place, and to become Miss Cardonnel of nowhere in particular, a young lady whose non-success in the matrimonial line sympathising friends will lament over. And Phœbe feels that the day when her sceptre must be so resigned is not very far off, now that Wilford, who has his father's obstinate temper, poor dear fellow, has taken a ridiculous fancy to this Miss Faunthorpe, a mere nobody, with nothing but a pretty face and a rich uncle to recommend her to notice.

Sir Wilford waits while his sister writes the letter of invitation, which she is obliged to make much warmer in tone than inclination would prompt; the baronet looking over her shoulder all the while.

When the letter is in its envelope he surprises Phœbe by taking it from her and putting it in his pocket.

"I am going over to Redcastle this afternoon," he says, "so I can deliver the letter and bring you back an answer. I should like you to give Miss Faunthorpe the tapestry room."

"My dear Wilford, what are you thinking of? I have ever so many married couples coming. I must put her in one of the small rooms in the Kneller gallery."

"Oh, very well," replies Sir Wilford, "she'll have the pick of the rooms, perhaps, some of these days.—Hi, Jess, old woman."

With which awful threat Sir Wilford withdraws, leaving his sisters free to discuss the calamity that lowers over their house.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARION IS RAISED TO DISTINCTION.

Sir Wilford, clad in the latest fashion in checks, a rough and fleecy raiment which his father would have deemed better suited to clothe his gamekeeper or groom than himself, and mounted on Bull of Bashan, is a sight to behold this winter afternoon as he trots gaily down the wide avenue at the How, and emerges therefrom on a bold and open country. The Bull is a little fresh this afternoon, which, being interpreted, means that the grooms have been too lazy to take the superfluous energy out of that amiable animal for the last two days, whereby the Bull behaves like a quadruped newly introduced to a strange country, where all sights and sounds, colours and shapes of objects, lights and shadows, are new to him. He shies ferociously at every trunk in the long line of elms, and indulges in a serpentine movement for the length of the avenue. He takes objection to the colour of the gravel where the road has been mended; and on suddenly beholding the white gate, which he ought to know as well as his own manger, recoils on his haunches, and curls himself up into a ball, and in this shape canters furiously into the road, startling the lazy waggoner asleep upon his wain, and rousing a flight of rooks from their afternoon repose by the clatter of his iron shoes. The cawing of the rooks finishes the Bull altogether, and sends him off like a maniac, or demoniacally possessed animal; but Sir Wilford having now got him into the open country is able to "take it out of him" over a fine stretch of moorland, and brings him back to the high road a couple of miles further off, a subdued and subjugated beast, willing to settle into a comfortable trot, which, with an occasional interval of walking, carries Sir Wilford into Redcastle by afternoon tea-time, that pleasant hour betwixt day and night, when labour rests, or should rest, from its cares, and the household music of the kettle singing on the hob speaks peace to the soul of the weary.

Mr. Trenchard is taking afternoon tea with his two nieces, Sibyl and Marion, in the firelit drawing-room at Lancaster Lodge, a room which, like most other rooms, looks its best by that uncertain light, now gorgeous in the glow of crimson and gold, anon wrapped in shadow. Marion has been invited to spend the day; the two girls have employed the short winter afternoon in a review of Sibyl's last new dresses, an inspection which has not been conducive to the younger sister's peace of mind or good temper.

At the announcement of Sir Wilford Cardonnel however, Marion brightens a little, and is glad.

"How lucky he should have called to-day!" she thinks. "Sibyl is too mean to ask me here on purpose to see him, and now he must be introduced to me and I can talk about knowing him as well as Sibyl. What will Maria Harrison say, I wonder, when I tell her that I am quite intimate with Sir Wilford Cardonnel?"

Marion little knows the mighty honour which fate has reserved for her—little dreams that by the happy accident of her presence at Lancaster Lodge this afternoon she is to be raised to a giddy height of grandeur, from which she will hardly be able to glance downwards without vertigo.

Sir Wilford is presented to Miss Marion Faunthorpe in due form by Mr. Trenchard, and the conversation becomes at once general and sprightly, glancing upon such original topics as the probability of a hard frost before long, the advantage of the present weather from a sporting point of view, the health and well-being of the baronet's stud, the superlative virtues and capabilities of his latest equine purchase, the probability of a day's good racing at Tilberry.

"You ought to see Tilberry steeplechase," says Sir Wilford. "Tilberry Common's only three miles from the How, you know, and it's an uncommonly good day's sport, gentlemen jocks, and that kind of thing. I've ridden there myself, but I didn't enter anything this year. You ought really, you know, Miss Faunthorpe; in point of fact, I came over here this afternoon on purpose to ask you and Mr. Trenchard to come and stay with us, next week. My sister gave me a letter for you. She's dreadfully anxious for you to come, and I think the change of air would do Mr. Trenchard good. We stand a good bit higher than you do, you know, and get a sniff off the moors—remarkably healthy, that kind of thing, I'm told. Do say yes now, Mr. Trenchard," he urges, handing Sibyl the letter.

"I'm afraid my dear uncle's health won't permit him to leave home," answers Sibyl. "He has been quite an invalid lately, you know, Sir Wilford."

"All the more reason he should have change of air—brace him up, you know. Capital thing for invalids, moorland air. And if Miss Mary Ann——"

"Marion," interjects that young lady. Not even by Sir Wilford Cardonnel will she submit to be called Mary Ann.

"If Miss Miriam——"

"Marion."

"I beg your pardon, I'm shaw. If Miss Marion will come I shall be delighted, and I'm sure my sister will be quite awfully glad."

Marion blushes crimson with delight at such an invitation.

"You're too kind," she gasps. "I positively doat upon races."

"I shouldn't have thought your passion for them had had time to reach such a height," says Sibyl, sneeringly, "since you never were at a race in your life before last year's summer meeting."

She is provoked at Marion's eagerness to accept an invitation, the acceptance of which can only bring embarrassment upon her, Sibyl.

"That means you'll come," exclaims Sir Wilford, answering Marion, "and, of course, if you say yes, Miss Faunthorpe can't say no. Sisters always think alike—two cherries on one stalk, like Juno's swans, together and inseparable, you know; and now we only want Mr. Trenchard's acquiescence."

"I should be a churl to refuse so hospitable an invitation, and deprive these girls of so much pleasure," replies Stephen Trenchard.

"Bravo!" cries Sir Wilford; "then it's all settled. You'll come next Saturday?"

"I don't think I could be ready by Saturday," murmurs Marion, with an awful fear upon the subject of her wardrobe, which will need herculean labours of cutting and contriving, and some expenditure of cash, before it can be fit for the halls of Cardonnel.

"Pray, dear uncle, do not think of us," says Sibyl, "I don't at all care about races, and, much as I appreciate Miss Cardonnel's kind invitation, I really would rather not accept it, for fear the fatigue and the excitement should be too much for you."

"Nasty thing," thinks Marion, "she refuses just because I'm invited."

"Artful puss," thinks Stephen, "she keeps him on by holding him off."

"Don't be afraid about your uncle, Miss Faunthorpe," says Sir Wilford, "we shall be awfully careful of him."

"I'm not quite so decrepid as my niece thinks me," says Mr. Trenchard, "and I shall quite enjoy a few days at the How."

"That's glorious," cries Sir Wilford, "On Saturday, then. You'll drive over in time for luncheon? Be sure you bring your habit, Miss Faunthorpe. I've a chestnut mare that will suit you to perfection. And I can mount you too, Miss Marion, if you like riding?"

"I positively adore it," gushes Marion. "Sibyl and I used to take it in turns to ride uncle Robert's pony when we were little things. I was so sorry when the pony grew too small for us."

Sir Wilford, having settled this important question, and drunk three cups of tea, chiefly for the pleasure of having his cup and saucer handed him by Sibyl, departs, leaving the elder sister heavy-hearted, the younger in a state of wild excitement, which her natural awe of Stephen Trenchard can hardly subdue.

"What am I to do about my things, Sibyl?" she whispers, as the two girls sit side by side on a sofa by the fire.

"What things?"

"My dresses, jackets, gloves, hats, boots, everything. I've hardly a rag that's fit to wear at the How."

"Then you oughtn't to have accepted the invitation. You might have seen that you were only asked because you happened to be here, and Sir Wilford could not very well leave you out."

"How unkind of you to say that!"

"It's preposterous to accept an invitation when you have no clothes fit to be worn at the house you're asked to visit. You ought to have refused."

"Ought I? That's very nice and sisterly of you, I'm sure. Very much like twin cherries and Juno's fiddlesticks. Just the only chance I ever had of enjoying myself and seeing life,—going into society, in fact, and a chance that would give me quite a new position in Redcastle, bring those horrid Stormonts and that disgusting Mrs. Groshen to their senses; and you expect me to refuse it. It's positively unnatural of you, Sibyl." And Marion relieves her bursting heart with a gush of tears.

"Why, what's the matter, girl?" cries Stephen Trenchard, starting from that placid slumber into which the fire-glow and the subdued murmur of the girls' voices have beguiled him. "You don't come here to cry, I hope, Marion. If we make you unhappy you'd better stay away."

Mr. Trenchard is not the kind of man to allow his afternoon repose to be disturbed by a whimpering niece. His young kinsfolk must make themselves agreeable if they hope to retain his favour.

"It's all Sibyl's unkindness," says Marion, swallowing her sobs in an unpleasantly convulsive manner. "She hasn't a bit of heart, she never had. When Sir Wilford Cardonnel has invited me and all, she throws my poverty in my face, and says I must refuse the invitation on account of my things."

"What does the girl mean by things?"

"I simply reminded Marion that the invitation gives us very short notice, and that her wardrobe is hardly fit for visiting at the How."

"Oh, is that all?" exclaims Mr. Trenchard. "That shan't stand in your way, Marion. You can get whatever you want for this visit at Carmichael's, and have it put down to Sibyl's account."

"Oh, uncle, you are too good, too generous," gasps Marion, forgetting how often she has inveighed against Mr. Trenchard's meanness.

"Don't make a fuss, please, Marion," says Stephen, closing his eyes again.

Sibyl is gloomy. She would do much to prevent this visit, were there any way open to her by which it could be prevented. She feels that to visit at Sir Wilford's house is a kind of treason against her husband. True that the baronet is not yet her declared admirer, but his admiration is not the less obvious, and the town gossips have already been busy with her name and Sir Wilford's. How provoking uncle Trenchard is—and Marion too! She hates them both, and preserves a sullen manner towards Marion all the evening, a sullenness which that young lady imputes to jealousy.

"Perhaps she thinks that Sir Wilford might be fickle enough to admire me a little," muses Marion, elated beyond measure by the prospect of her visit, and the idea of getting "things" at Carmichael's. "Of course Sibyl is the beauty, we all know that: but I flatter myself I have a little more animation than she has, and in the long run, fascinating manners are more admired than good looks."

Fortified thus in her self-esteem Marion departs in the highest spirits, after having made Sibyl promise to go shopping with her next morning.

Sibyl makes her preparations for the visit with a heavy heart. She assists Marion kindly enough now that she has resigned herself to the inevitable. She lends her sister the aid of her counsel, and considerably chastens Marion's taste in colours and patterns, a taste which inclines to the "loud" and "fast," large checks, big metal buttons, yachting jackets, and small pork-pie hats. Sibyl takes care that her sister shall be dressed like a lady, which may be done cheaply, and not like a fashion plate, the latter involving lavish expenditure, and often resulting in disappointment. Sibyl selects hues which harmonize with Marion's hair and complexion, and not the last new colour, which the shopman presses upon her, as if novelty and beauty were convertible terms.

"I'm afraid you'll make me an awful dowdy," remonstrates Marion, who is inclined to object to the combination of rich brown and soft cream-colour, which Sibyl recommends for a walking costume, and this languid shade of blue, relieved by ruchings, pipings, and flouncings of palest salmon, which Sibyl declares will make a lovely dinner dress.

"See what Miss Eylett will say to my choice," says Sibyl.

"Oh, of course that old Eylett will side with you. She knows how to flatter a good customer."

"Choose for yourself then, Marion, and be happy."

"Well, upon my word, I don't know what to have," says Marion, surveying the counter, and biting the tip of her gloved forefinger to assist cogitation. "There's that lovely peach, I should like of all things, and that heavenly maize. Think of it trimmed with black lace."

"Charming for a brunette, but odious for a blonde. And to trim it properly you would want at least fifty pounds' worth of lace."

"That apple-green brocade, then, with the lovely rosebuds."

"Admirable for a dowager, but quite unsuited to you."

"I wonder if uncle Trenchard would mind my having a ruby velvet? I have always fancied a ruby velvet."

"With a diamond tiara, of course. Most appropriate for a country surgeon's niece, especially when he's the parish doctor."

"Well, I suppose you'd better choose. I'll have the blue and salmon, but it's a horrid thin silk."

"Quite good enough for an evening dress, which will be done for when its freshness is gone."

So Marion finally accepts Sibyl's superior judgment. Her purchases include a pretty gray merino for mornings and walking, a rich brown silk, the pale blue dinner dress, and handsome black cloth jacket, garments which are judiciously bought for something less than thirty pounds. With these materials the two girls drive straight to Miss Evlett, who, with much persuasion from Sibyl, is induced to promise the three dresses for Saturday morning.

"And now all you have to do is to get Hester to wash and iron your white muslins," says Sibyl, "so that you may have some simple dresses for the quiet evenings. I'll lend you a sash or two."

"Upon my word, Sib, you're quite a darling. What made you so disagreeable last night?"

"I don't want to go to the How, and I was vexed with you and uncle Trenchard for snapping at the invitation."

"Don't want to go to the How!" cries Marion, with as much astonishment as if Sibyl had said she didn't wish to go to heaven. "Don't want to go to the How, when it's the grandest chance you ever had in your life, and people are beginning to say that you can be Lady Cardonnel if you like."

"People are idiots and busybodies. I don't want to be Lady Cardonnel, or Lady anybody else."

"Sibyl, don't be so affected!" exclaims Marion, disgusted by a repudiation which she believes thoroughly insincere.

Mr. Trenchard's carriage deposits Marion at the shabby old house beyond the minster, and Jenny comes rushing out into the wintry air—last year's tartan frock a good deal too short for those obtrusive legs of hers—to kiss Sibyl, to the disgust of the coachman, who looks upon this branch of his employer's family as a low lot.

"That's the worst of living with these here novvo riches," he complains to John the footman. "They may climb the ladder of fortune theirselves, but they leave their relations a-grovellin' at the bottom."

"What do you mean by novvo riches?" inquires the simple John.

"Well, parwennoos, stoopid, if you must 'av the wernackerler."

Hester and Jenny Faunthorpe have rather a hard time of it for the rest of this important week, Hester at the wash-tub and the ironing-board, Jane engaged in darning stockings and sewing on tapes and buttons, her sister's wardrobe requiring more small repairs than are consistent with a notion of order and industry in its owner.

"Well, you have let your things go to seed, Marion," remarks Jane. "If it hadn't been for this visit of yours I should think you must have dropped to pieces altogether before long."

"You're an impertinent chit," exclaims Marion, frowning over a complicated darn.

"Well, you might be civil when I'm toiling like a slave for you."

"You may help me or leave it alone, just as you please. It's no pleasure to be under an obligation to you."

"As far as inclination goes, I'd much rather leave it alone," replies the argumentative Jane, "but for the credit of the family I shall do my best to prevent you going into society with your heels coming through your stockings. But I can't help saying that I think you'd find it better for the health of your stockings to darn them before they come to this;" and Jenny emphasizes her remark by thrusting her hand through a yawning chasm in the stocking she is operating upon.

"Keep your opinions to yourself, and don't make the holes bigger by sticking your enormous hand through them," says Marion.

"This is a grateful world," murmurs Jane, resignedly.

Dr. Faunthorpe is pleased at the idea of his younger niece's pleasure, though the visit to the How will drag a pound or two out of his scantily furnished purse, pounds already engaged for tax or water rate, as the case may be, and the subtraction of which will throw his financial arrangements out of gear for ever so long. But Robert Faunthorpe is one of those good little men whose mission upon this earth seems to be to suffer and be patient, if not to suffer and be strong. Nay, is there not exceeding strength in this quiet patience, this placid endurance of loss and deprivation, this uncomplaining surrender of all that the selfish live for? Humboldt wisely says that if every man is said to have his own destiny in his hands, that saying must be read to mean, not that he has the power to alter fate, but rather the power to make the best of bad fortune, and by his gentle acceptance of ill to transmute evil into good. Deprivations, small acts of self-abnegation which would have hurt another man, gave Dr. Faunthorpe a pleasant feeling, a genial sense of warmth and comfort in the region of the heart, which had the effect of whisky toddy or any other comfortable stimulant.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE HOW.

SATURDAY shows bright and fair, a fine winter day, hoar frost on the hedges. The roads are dry, but not too hard for the horses; the minster towers stand out, sharply defined against the clear cold blue; rooks are screaming loud in the ragged elm boughs; robins singing merrily; a blithe day in the new-born year, a day which inspires Redcastle with the idea that trade is brisker than it has been, and things in general looking up, so potent is the influence of fine weather.

Never has Marion Faunthorpe felt so proud or happy as when her uncle's carriage calls for her and her boxes, and she takes her seat opposite Mr. Trenchard, who, by right divine of his three-score years and ten, occupies the post of honour wrapped to the chin in sable, and with a tiger-skin rug over his knees.

"Did you shoot that tiger yourself, dear uncle?" asks Marion, bent on making herself agreeable.

"No, child," replies the dear uncle rather snappishly, "I had something better to do in India than to shoot tigers."

"But it's very nice shooting big game, isn't it, uncle? Some people go to India on purpose for that, don't they?"

"Fools do, perhaps. There's no accounting for their taste."

The little surgeon has come out to the gate to see his niece off. Nay, he has actually stolen an hour from the parish in order to behold the glory of her departure. He seems as pleased to see her happiness as if he himself were going to the How, and at the last moment the girl feels touched.

"You dear, darling old uncle," she says, hanging round his neck, and forgetting the possibility of damage to her new hat, "how good you always are!—always—always—always, and I'm an ungrateful wretch."

"My love, you are not ungrateful, and you have very little to be grateful for."

"Everything you mean, uncle Robert. I shall think of you ever so many times a day at the How; and if the dinners are very nice I shall so wish you could be with us."

"Thank you, my dear. I shall think of you, and miss you very much."

"I'm going to keep house," exclaims Jenny, lolling against the gate, and swaying to and fro distractingly as she talks; "and make tea and all; nobody to tell me not to take too much butter; and Hester will give us my favourite puddings, I know, if I quill her cap borders."

So after embracing the doctor in this demonstrative fashion, Marion enters the carriage with tears in her eyes, to the aggravation of Stephen Trenchard, who hates tears and fuss and emotion of all kinds, except the thrill of delight which accompanies a successful stroke of business.

"Crying again," he exclaims testily. "What's the matter now?"

"There's nothing the matter, dear uncle. Only I'm so happy; and I felt a little overcome at leaving uncle Robert."

"It's a pity you should leave him at all if the parting is so pathetic," sneers Mr. Trenchard.

"Oh, Sibyl, I've had such a nice little note from Miss Cardonnel to confirm Sir Wilford's invitation," says Marion; and she exhibits a formal note, in which the polite Phœbe expresses her satisfaction at having heard from her brother that Miss Marion Faunthorpe has promised to accompany her sister on Saturday.

The drive is delightful for any one with an unburdened mind, and even Sibyl feels the sweetness of the clear winter air, and determines to make the best of an awkward concatenation of events. After all, it is better to be lolling in uncle Trenchard's carriage on one's way to a delightful old country house than to be grinding at French or German verbs in Mrs. Hazleton's cheerless second-floor schoolroom, badly warmed by a fire that seems always made of the dullest coals that ever came from the bosom of the earth. And all this is but the filling up of a gap in her life. This chasm of time bridged over and she will be with Alexis once more, and they will have uncle Trenchard's money to spend and be happy ever afterwards. She has persuaded herself that let Alexis make what protestations he pleases in the present, he will take her to his heart again gladly when the fitting time comes.

"And in the meantime there is no use in my moping and making myself miserable," reflects Sibyl, her spirits elevated by atmospheric influences, and the prospect of being the object of general admiration.

"I wonder if there will be many people there?" she speculates presently.

"People with titles," suggests Marion; "a duke perhaps. I should like to see a duke—or a duchess. That would be better still. Think of her dresses, Sib. Mustn't they be magnificent!"

Sibyl smiles the languid smile of contempt at her sister's simplicity.

"As if there were a sliding scale for the toilet," she says. "Why, cotton spinners' wives dress as well as duchesses now-a-days. They employ the same milliners, and pay their bills quicker."

"It's dreadful to think of," replies Marion. "It seems like turning things topsy-turvy, you know."

They are at the How by this time, a domain which Marion enters open-eyed and dumb with awe. Sir Wilford comes out into the porch to receive them, and gives directions about their luggage, and makes himself generally busy. Then he calls out Phœbe and introduces Marion to her, at which Marion, being almost tongue-tied by shyness, says, "Thank you."

"You show the Miss Faunthorpes their rooms, Phœbe," says the hospitable baronet; but this is a length to which Miss Cardonnel will not go, though she conducted her dearest Cecilia to her apartment half an hour ago with her arm round Cecilia's severely trained waist.

"Perker knows all about the rooms," she says, whereupon appears the essence of respectability in a black silk gown and smart cap, otherwise Mrs. Perker the housekeeper.

Sibyl and Marion follow this personage up the broad oak staircase to a long perspective of corridor, in which Mrs. Perker opens two doors next each other, and reveals twin bedchambers neatly furnished with maple and chintz.

"I thought you two ladies would like to be next each other," remarks the housekeeper obligingly, as if the choice of the rooms were entirely her own.

"We do, very much," exclaims Marion, who regains her power of speech in this inferior presence. "I'm very glad I'm to be near Sibyl. I should be awfully afraid of ghosts in this great rambling house."

Mrs. Perker smiles condescendingly, as if she were a superior order of being, accustomed to large houses and family spectres.

"It is a rambling old place," she says, "but I shouldn't fancy myself in one of your fine lightsome modern houses, all glare and gilding."

"And there is a ghost, I dare say," says Marion, with thrilling interest.

The housekeeper screws up her lips and smiles significantly, as if she could, and if she would, tell of as many apparitions as appear in the tragedy of "Macbeth."

"There has never been a ghost owned to at the How," she says, "and I wouldn't breathe the name of such a thing in Miss Cardonnel's hearing, but people *have* been frightened—strangers. It may have been rats, or it may have been the wind. I can't say. But there are friends of the family who wouldn't sleep in this corridor, no, not for a thousand pounds."

Marion shudders, and almost wishes herself back in the shabby old house at the end of Redcastle.

"So here are your rooms, young ladies, opening into each other."

"How nice!" exclaims Marion.

Never in her life has she felt more warmly attached to Sibyl than she does at this moment.

Fires burn cheerily in both rooms, and each apartment has that thoroughly comfortable and convenient air only to be seen in a well-ordered country house, and altogether distinct from the cheerless precision of an hotel bedchamber.

There is the nice little writing-table, with all things needful for correspondence, in front of the fire; the easy chair; the candles, and pincushion, and a hothouse flower or two in a slender glass on the dressing-table. All smiles a welcome to the stranger—not Miss Cardonnel's welcome, by the way, but Mrs. Perker's.

"I've given your maid a nice room on the second floor, within easy reach of this, ma'am," says the housekeeper, at which Marion's eyes open wide with wonder.

"I have no maid," replies Sibyl, unabashed by that humiliating fact; "I am accustomed to wait upon myself."

"Indeed, ma'am. Some young ladies prefer it, I know. For my own part I couldn't bear anybody fidgeting about me. And if you should require any assistance Miss Cardonnel's maid will be very happy."

"Thanks, no, my sister can help me if I want her."

And Sibyl proceeds to open her handsome portmanteaus, while Marion contrives to stand before the shabby receptacle which contains her property, lest the scrutinizing eye of Mrs. Perker should behold its dilapidation.

The housekeeper bustles off, and leaves the two girls to themselves.

"It's rather like going to school again, isn't it, Sibyl?" inquires Marion, whose spirits have sunk a little, oppressed by the unfamiliar splendours of the How. "I feel just as I did the day we went to Miss Worries, and I can't help fancying we shall be told off into our different classes when we go downstairs."

The sound of the luncheon-bell reminds the sisters that they have no time to waste, and they go downstairs together presently, conscious that they are looking nice enough to face even unfriendly criticism. Sir Wilford is lounging in the hall, and they go in to luncheon under his wing. Fred Stormont is near the dining-room door, and rushes to meet Sibyl and her sister; and Mrs. Stormont gives a friendly bow from the other end of the table, where she sits among the stately matrons and the bald-headed fathers of the land; and they begin to feel themselves more at home, as Marion whispers to her sister.

The conversation at luncheon runs more continuously upon the present company's absent brothers and sisters, and cousins, and nieces, and sons and daughters-in-law, than is quite congenial to the feelings of a stranger totally unacquainted with these relations, but Marion manages to get up a little talk about nothing particular with Fred Stormont, which, beheld from afar, looks like flirtation, and causes the young man's anxious mother to put up her gold eye-glass and look at him through it, wondering how that silly Frederick can be so ridiculous as to waste his attentions upon the wrong sister.

"I suppose Mr. Trenchard will leave the girl five thousand pounds or so," thinks Mrs. Stormont, "but what would be the use of that to a young man with Fred's expensive habits?"

CHAPTER XXX.

TILBERRY STEEPLECHASE.

THE guests assembled at the How soon divide themselves into sections or groups, like the various members of the lower animal creation. Mr. and Mrs. Chasubel draw around them the more seriously minded of the younger visitors,—Lavinia Cardonnel; Cecilia Hawtree, who has a poetical mind, and is Anglican to the verge of Romanism; Laura and Mary Radnor, who are great upon church decoration and choir singing; and some others. General Mactower attracts the young men, as it were, into a focus of sporting talk, varied with anecdotes of the London world, which, according to the General, is about as vile a world as could well exist without calling down a burning fiery rain for its destruction. Sir Wilford contrives to be attentive to all his guests, but shows himself so particular in his devotion to Sibyl that other people cannot afford to be uncivil to her, even were they disposed to snub so lovely a girl.

The matrons and their daughters admit the fact of Miss Faunthorpe's beauty, but with certain reservations. They admire her complexion, but opine that its transparent purity of tint argues a consumptive tendency.

"And what a dreadful thing for poor Sir Wilford to marry a consumptive wife, my dear!" says Mrs. Radnor, in an awful voice.

"And to have consumptive children," adds her daughter Laura.

"Poor little dears," exclaims Miss Hawtree, compassionating he sorrows of these unborn infants in advance. "I think it quite wicked of consumptive people to marry, don't you, Mrs. Radnor?"

"Yes, my love, there ought to be a law against it."

"What pretty manners Miss Faunthorpe has!" remarks Mrs. Vernon, whose daughter possesses every attraction except good ooks and agreeable manners,—"so sweet, so caressing. But on't you think—I hardly like to say it, for it sounds so unharitable, and I should be the last to say anything uncharitable fter dear Mr. Chasubel's moving discourse this morning,—don't ou think she seems rather artful?"

"As deep as Garrick," says the outspoken Mrs. Radnor.

"She actually seems to discourage Sir Wilford's attentions, uite pretends to avoid him, makes believe to prefer ladies' society, when we all know that she must be delighted at the idea of making such a brilliant match."

"When we know that the girl is brought here on purpose to marry him," rejoins Mrs. Radnor. "The old uncle has set his heart upon it, of course, and will leave her the whole of his property, to the detriment of her two sisters; there's another girl at Redcastle, Mrs. Stormont tells me. Very unjust, I call it."

This conversation takes place on Sunday afternoon, in a cosy circle round the morning-room fire, while Sibyl and some of the younger guests are walking in the park. Sunday evening affords an opportunity for the display of musical genius, or talent, as the case may be; and after the daughters of the land have done the most they can with Miss Lindsay's sacred ballads, Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Chopin, Sibyl takes her turn at the instrument, and surpasses all her forerunners, not so much by the brilliancy of her singing or playing as by the thought and feeling which pervade both. In the long empty days at Lancaster Lodge her piano has been her friend and companion, the confidante of all her vague regrets and fears,—her sorrowful love for her absent husband. Memory and hope have spoken to her in many a tender strain of Mozart's, in the deeper pathos of Beethoven, or Mendelssohn's dreamy melody.

Sir Wilford Cardonnel knows very little about music, save that of his hounds giving tongue in the chill morning air that blows over heath and moor, but he is not the less pleased that Sibyl should excel in the musical line. His future wife ought to be an accomplished person. He is glad, too, that she should "take the shine" out of Phœbe and Vinnie, neither of them highly gifted by Apollo, though both have laboured hard, and flourish at a quickish pace through unmelodious fantasias, arpeggio-ing up and down the piano with a movement which their brother calls a rough gallop.

Altogether Sibyl is a success at the How. No one can dispute that. Marion looks on and wonders at her sister's calm acceptance of the general homage. She wears her honours as to the manner born, while Marion feels overpowered with shyness all through that aristocratic Sabbath; and says "Thank you," for everything, from an introduction or a compliment, to the too hasty removal of her plate by an all-accomplished serving-man.

By Monday morning, however, even Marion is quite at her ease, save for an inward awe of Phœbe and Lavinia who, behind their brother's back, give her a little of the *de haut en bas* manner by which intrusive commoners are crushed. But Fred Stormont takes her under his protection, and finding Sibyl unapproachable amidst her various admirers, consoles himself with a mild flirtation with Marion, to which even his watchful parent reconciles herself, reflecting that, after all, a dower of five thousand pounds

—or possibly ten—is better than nothing, and that, no heiress being forthcoming, dear Frederick might make Marion happy by proposing to her.

After breakfast on Monday there is a general inspection of the stables, at which even Mr. Chasubel, the High Church parson, assists, and in the course of which he entertains the company with anecdotes of his hard riding days at Oxford, and his prowess in the hunting-field. The horses are led out for admiration, and the guests commit themselves to various opinions, at which the nether lips of the Yorkshire grooms work convulsively in the respectful endeavour to avoid a grin.

Tuesday is the race day, and there is a consultation as to how people are to go: the faster of the party—including all the young ladies—inclining to the saddle, the middle-aged and portly being satisfied with a seat on the drag, or in Miss Cardonnel's barouche.

"You will ride, of course?" says Sir Wilford to Frederick.

"Oh, by all means; I shall go on the Dutchman. Here he is, poor old fellow, looking as fresh as paint."

An officious boy has just led the bony gray into the quadrangle, where every eye is now directed to him.

"Why, where the deuce did you get that beast from, Cardonnel?" cries General Mactower, as the lad whisks off the Dutchman's checked raiment, and exhibits his angular haunches and dejected neck. "Never saw such a screw in your stable."

"It's Mr. Stormont's horse," says the boy, grinning.

"Beg your pardon, Stormont," says the General, "I dare say he looks better in action. Very good for leather, no doubt."

"He may not be much to look at," says Fred, wounded yet apologetic; "but he's a devil to go."

"Ah, I dare say, those bony ones are sometimes."

"Well, Stormont, you'll ride the Dutchman," resumes Sir Wilford, "that's capital. You can take care of Miss Marion Faunthorpe."

"Delighted, I'm sure," gasps Fred, with an inward sinking. He knows too well that on the Dutchman he has enough to do to take care of himself, and that a whole hunting-field might be spilt around him without his being able to afford help to the fallen.

"You haven't ridden much lately, I think you told me, Miss Marion, says Sir Wilford to that young lady, who has been going into raptures about all the horses with long manes and sleek skins.

"Not since I was quite a little thing, but I idolize riding."

"And you'll not be afraid to ride to Tilberry to-morrow. It's a nice quiet road."

"I shall like it of all things."

"Very well, Chanter, you must find me a safe mount for this young lady. She hasn't been riding much lately."

"One of the old ones, eh, Sir Wilford?"

"Yes, old and steady. But something good to look at, you know."

"There's Brown Fixture, Sir Wilford, an uncommon good 'oss, and as safe as a church."

"Yes, Fixture 'll do, nothing like an old steeplechaser."

"Fixture's as steady as a Christian," says the groom, "and such a memory too, nobody 'd think how that 'oss do remember. He ain't forgot the day he bolted with Jem Kirk, tho' it's nigh seven year ago. He never do pass that corner o' th' 'eath but what 'e'll prick up his old ears, and stick 'em back'ards and give a bit of a quiver, as if he'd like to have another lark."

"He mustn't have any larks with Miss Faunthorpe," says Sir Wilford.

"Lor, bless you, no, Sir Wilford, that's seven year ago. Fixture's as steady as a house. The smallest of our boys rides him beautiful."

"Well, Miss Marion, I think you'll be safe on Fixture, especially with Stormont to take care of you."

Marion looks gratefully at Frederick, with a vague idea that he is going to escort her with a leading rein, and that under his care she would be safe upon the winner of the Leger.

"And now let's have a look at Juno," says Wilford. "That's the mare I mean for you, Miss Faunthorpe, and I think every one will allow she's a perfect beauty. My sister Phœbe wants her badly, but I'm afraid of Phœbe's eleven stone."

That substantially built damsel gives her brother an indignant look at this brutal remark, which could only come from one's own flesh and blood.

"When I want a horse I shan't ask you to choose him for me, Wilford," she says.

Juno is led forth and unveiled—a chesnut, glossy as the nut itself when it bursts from its green casing, and beautiful in form, with a small head and a Greek profile—ox-eyed like her mighty namesake.

"How lovely!" exclaim all the young ladies, envying Sibyl.

This selection of the best horse in the stud for Miss Faunthorpe is tantamount to a proposal, thinks every one, and from this time forward Sibyl is regarded as the future Lady Cardonnel, and honoured accordingly.

Has he or has he not proposed? the council of matrons ask one another by-and bye in the comfortable morning-room where they have assembled to write their letters and read the newspapers.

The majority opine that the offer has been made and accepted, and that Mr. Trenchard is here to arrange about settlements.

"Phœbe Cardonnel must know," hazards Mrs. Chasubel, this conversation taking place in the absence of the Miss Cardonnels, who are playing billiards with their younger guests.

"She may, but she's such a reserved girl, there's no getting anything out of her; and as it's evident that she and Lavinia hate the idea of their brother's marrying, it's a subject we can't approach very well."

"I feel sure he has proposed," says Mrs. Radnor. He looks as if it was a settled thing."

"He may have settled it all in his own mind, but not yet declared himself," responds Mrs. Chasubel. "He must know that there is no chance of rejection."

Mrs. Chasubel is right. Sir Wilford is fixed as fate, but has not yet found an opportunity to ask the fatal question. Sibyl is always in a crowd. She contrives to avoid anything approaching a *tête-à-tête*. And a man can hardly propose during a game of pyramids, or on a crowded drag with a spirited team in his hand, or as he hands his beloved a cup of tea at kettledrum time, or on the stairs, or in church.

Sir Wilford bides his time, therefore, and is patient.

The important Tuesday is a fine clear day, with a high wind, but no frost. Tilberry Races begin at half-past one, so there is no time for luncheon at the How, and a necessity for picnic baskets on the drag, very much to the delight of all the younger guests, who prefer to take their refreshment uncomfortably out of doors to the commonplace convenience of the dining-room.

At a quarter before one the horses and carriages are brought round to the porch, and Marion, in a borrowed habit and chimney-pot hat, which is balanced rather hazardously on a small mountain of padded hair, awaits, with some faint apprehension, her first ride on anything larger than Tommy, the old pony.

She has not yet seen Brown Fixture, and as she stands on the top step with Fred Stormont at her side she surveys the animals timorously.

There is Juno, satin-skinned and proud of bearing, arching her graceful neck, and gazing pensively at the company with her ox-eyes, pawing the ground a little with one delicate hoof, as if eager to take flight. And here is Sibyl, looking her prettiest, a small, slender prettiness, in neatly fitting riding habit, and hat poised at exactly the right angle.

Sir Wilford is at hand to mount her, and there is the usual careful adjustment of stirrup and skirt, curb and snaffle.

"I wonder which is my horse?" says Marion, with an appealing look at Mr. Stormont.

"Which is Fixture, boy?" asks Fred of an attendant lad.

"This here, sir," answers the youth.

"This here" is the animal in his charge, a tall brute, with a neck a yard long, and, in the language of the stable, too much daylight underneath.

"Good gracious!" cries Marion, appalled at the aspect of this animal, "am I to go up there?"

"He's a big one, isn't he?" responds Fred. "Capital stride I should think, get over plenty of ground in his gallop. Looks like an old steeplechaser, doesn't he?"

"He looks very dreadful," says Marion, dubiously.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of him. He's steady enough, depend upon it. Sir Wilford's head man wouldn't put you on an unsafe horse."

"I hope not," says Marion. "But you'll take care of me, won't you, Mr. Stormont?"

"I'll do my best," answers Fred. "Ah, here's the Dutchman, rather fresh, I'm afraid."

This last remark has reference to an uncouth attempt of the Dutchman to back into an adjacent shrubbery, on being dragged out of which he entangles himself clumsily with the other horses.

The drag and barouche have driven off by this time, and everybody is mounted except Marion and her swain.

Mounting Marion upon Fixture is not the easiest operation in mechanics. She gives a tremendous spring, but always at the wrong moment, and after two or three false starts she is hoisted to a level with Fixture's saddle, only to remain there suspended in mid air until allowed to slide gently to earth again.

"I'm afraid I'm not a good hand at mounting a lady," murmurs the patient Frederick, after he has made himself almost apoplectic in the endeavour, and now an experienced groom comes forward, tells Marion exactly at what angle to put her left leg, and throws her up into the saddle as if she were a ball.

"Gracious!" she exclaims, "I'm here at last, but oh, how high it is!"

She surveys the earth beneath her with a sense of awe; it is like being on a mountain top, and not half so safe. She gives a little cry of surprise when Fixture begins to move, as if motion were the last thing one might expect from a horse.

The rest of the riders have gone down the avenue, Sir Wilford riding Bull of Bashan, and keeping close beside Sibyl on Juno.

Frederick now clambers upon the Dutchman, who to the last moment struggles to elude his half-proprietor, as if desirous to prove that a horse cannot serve two masters. Fixture caracoles gently upon the gravel sweep while Fred is mounting, but even these gentle movements strike terror to the unaccustomed soul of Marion.

"I'm afraid he's very spirited," she remarks to one of the grooms.

"Lord, mum, he's nigh twelve year old, there's none too much sperrit in him. You'd best ride him on the curb if you're any ways timid."

"Which is the curb?" inquires Marion.

The man shows her, and adjusts her reins, which she has been clutching in her right hand in an inextricable tangle.

"But do you think I can manage him with the reins in my left hand?" she asks. "It seems so left-handed, I'm afraid I shan't have any power over him."

"You can hold on with both hands if you're timersome, miss, but the lighter you handle Fixture the better. He's got a very nice mouth, and he don't stand being sawed at. Ride him on the curb if you like, but let your 'and foller 'is 'ed."

This language is as dark as Hebrew to Marion. She has but one thought, and that is that she would fain be at rest in the barouche or the drag, nay, safe at home in the obscurity of domestic life, with cross Hester and impertinent Jane. Anywhere, anywhere, off the back of Brown Fixture, who has just caught sight of some obnoxious object, and has made himself into an arch from which Marion feels as if she were sliding.

Fred has now brought the Dutchman so far into subjection as to turn his nose towards the avenue, and Fixture being clutched and jerked in the same direction by Marion, the two set out, as uncomfortable a couple as ever enjoyed the delights of equestrian exercise. When they are well out of ear-shot the grooms and boys burst into a simultaneous guffaw.

"After this we must have some beer," says the head man. "I'm blest if ever I see such a brace o' cockneys. I ain't had such a laugh since Chrizzlemas."

Fixture proves himself worthy of his reputation, and goes down the avenue with amiable sobriety, nay, would be perfect in his conduct were it not for that brute the Dutchman, who shies at sight of a rabbit, wheels round altogether at sight of a rook, and otherwise disgraces himself by convulsive movements and collapses which disturb Fixture's equanimity, though he evidently regards them with contempt. The brown horse behaves so well, however, that when they have walked down the avenue and emerged upon the road, Marion begins to feel quite easy in her mind, and to think that after all she really does doat upon riding.

But for the Dutchman's evil example Fixture would behave admirably all the way to Tilberry, a nice level road, with little to alarm a reasonable equine mind. The Dutchman is, however, a creature without reasonableness of mind, and contrives to see objects of horror in the clearest road, whereby Marion is every now and then startled from her equanimity by a sudden bouncing of Mr. Stormont's horse against hers, a movement by which she narrowly escaped being pushed into a ditch.

"Isn't your horse a little wrong in his mind, Mr. Stormont?" she asks, after one of these encounters. "He puts his ears back in such a dreadful way, and starts and plunges so awfully."

"Only high spirit," replies Fred, "all thoroughbreds do it."

"Then I think I'd rather ride an unthorough-bred," says Marion.

When they have walked for about half a mile Frederick suggests a gentle trot, to which proposal Marion acquiesces smilingly. But the very beginning of the gentle trot makes her breathless, and she finds herself jerked about in her saddle in a most ferocious way. She holds on to the reins, however, with both hands, and endures stoutly, till Fred, in charity, reins in the Dutchman, whereupon Fixture stops as if some spring had been touched in his internal economy, and nearly pitches Marion out of the saddle by the suddenness of his stoppage.

"I'm afraid you don't quite enjoy trotting," says Fred.

Marion pants for a little while, struggling with the innumerable hair-pins which sustain her pyramid of plaits, before she can recover breath enough to answer.

"I dare say it's very nice," she replies at last, "but it jerks one, don't you think? Perhaps Fixture is not a good trotter?"

"I think if you were to rise with him, and sit a little more in the middle of your saddle, you might find it more comfortable," suggests Frederick.

"Do you think so? I'll try next time."

Fred endeavours to explain the theory of trotting, which, although he has not quite conquered the practice, is firmly impressed upon his mind

"Now," he says, flattering himself that he has made it all clear, "suppose we try again?"

A shake of the reins makes the Dutchman lunge violently forward as if he wanted to dash his brains out upon the road, and starts Fixture in a really delightful trot, if poor Marion only knew it. She bobs up and down as if she were bathing, but when she rises the horse doesn't, and the effect is even more jerky than before. She is just beginning to despair, when the red glow of a cottage fire, shining through an open door, appals the Dutchman's soul, and sends him into a wild canter, in which Fixture immediately joins. The horses tear along the road like the herd of swine driven down a steep place, and Marion, frightened, but rather enjoying the swinging pace, finds herself rising in her saddle as high as anyone could desire.

Inspired by the clatter of their hoofs the brutes rush on for some distance, Fred as powerless to pull up the Dutchman as he would be to stop a steam engine at express pace, or stay the passage of the north wind. When the horses have had enough they stop.

"I think I rose pretty well then," remarks Marion, self-complacently.

"Just now, when your were cantering?"

"Yes."

"But you oughtn't rise in the canter, you know," says Fred. "You must sit as if you were part of your horse; 'sit down on him and ride him,' as the jockeys say."

"Good gracious! It's very puzzling," exclaims Marion.

"All practice. You must contrive to ride more."

"Yes. I should like it above all things. Uncle Trenchard has bought Sibyl a horse. But I am not so favoured."

"Ah, it's a good thing to be the favourite, isn't it?"

That canter has brought them nearly to the racecourse. They overtake the rest of their party, Sibyl looking as cool and comfortable upon Juno as if she were sitting in her favourite easy chair at Lancaster Lodge, while Marion is painfully conscious that the last half-hour's unaccustomed exercise has made an object of her.

"How have you enjoyed your ride?" asks Sibyl, coming to her side.

"Oh, pretty well," replies Marion, rather crossly. "I'm not accustomed to riding, like you, you know I haven't a horse of my own. Isn't my hair dreadful?"

"It's rather rough. But that doesn't matter."

"Oh, not in the least—to you."

"How do you like Fixture?" asks Sir Wilford, coming up to them.

"Very well, thank you. But I think he uses the wrong legs when he trots."

Tilberry racecourse is a long strip of meadow land by the side of a river, rather a dreary scene on a gray winter's day, were it not for the carriages, horses, tax carts, and various vehicles which enliven it, and the eager crowd on foot.

Sir Wilford and his party are the most important group upon the ground, the rest of the assembly consisting chiefly of tenant farmers and their families, with a sprinkling of the Redcastle tradespeople, and a few smart carriages belonging to the manufacturing classes, chiefly noticeable for the newness of their harness, the splendour of their liveries, and the indifferent quality of their horses.

Sir Wilford pats Fixture's neck with a friendly air as he stands beside Marion.

"Poor old Fixture. Capital fellow he used to be six or seven years ago. I've ridden him many a time over this very course. Won a cup with him once, poor old chap. I wonder if he remembers?"

"Where's the steeple, Sir Wilford?" asks Marion, looking round at the landscape.

"The what?"

"The steeple. It's a steeplechase, isn't it?"

Sir Wilford smiles at the damsel's innocence.

"Steeplechase—across country, you know, and all that. There's no necessity for a steeple."

"Oh, I thought you chose a steeple, and then rode straight to it, over hedges and ditches, and everything."

"We've sunk the steeple. But we go over the hedges and ditches. There's the saddling bell. Yes, Fixture does remember."

"I wish he didn't," says Marion nervously, as the animal pricks up his ears, and begins to curvet in a restless manner, which makes it rather difficult to hold him.

The equestrians are drawn up in a line by the side of the racecourse. There are no railings to divide the course from the rest of the meadow. It is only marked out by a line of sods turned up by the spade, and a post at intervals. The timber jumps are by no means desperate, and are well guarded by furze bushes; the water jump is a muddy ditch about twenty feet broad.

"I wish you'd hold him for me," says Marion, appealing to Mr. Stormont. "He's been so dreadfully excited since that bell rang."

Fred clutches at Fixture's rein for a minute or so, and tries at the same time to soothe the Dutchman, who has just expresssd his antipathy to a very small child in a pinafore, eating a large piece of parliament.

Fixture shuffles about a little, and then seems to grow calm. Sir Wilford and his party ride up and down, impatient for the beginning of the sport. Marion and her protector keep together by the course.

The bell rings again, louder this time. There is a gust of excitement in the very wind. The signal is given, the gaily coloured jackets blaze out against the cold gray sky, the horses are off with a rush—Fixture following them.

He has stood like a statue to see them go by, then, as they passed him, he has gathered himself together, and pursued them like a maniac. The old steeplechaser has not forgotten his trade.

There is a cry of horror from Sir Wilford and his party, a roar—half terror, half laughter—from the crowd, as Marion is borne along, her arms frantically encircling the animal's neck, her plaits flying in the wind, her shrill shrieks ringing out upon the air. She drops something at every stage of her journey. First her whip, then her handkerchief, then her hat, then one of the plaits, an artificial enrichment which she has deemed a necessarya ppendage to a very good head of hair. On flies Fixture, struggling for a place, feeling that he must win or perish in the attempt. Marion, with her face buried in his mane, sees nothing, knows nothing, except that she is miraculously holding on somehow, and that sudden death is imminent. The timber jump is before them, and the spectators hold their breaths, anticipating a fearful fall, perhaps a deadly one, when Sir Wilford gallops across on Bull of Bashan, and contrives to catch Fixture's bridle just as he is lifting himself to the leap.

The old steeplechaser swings on one side and lands Marion comfortably on the turf, where she lies motionless till kindly hands raise her. She is only stunned, and comes to her senses after a minute or so to find herself the centre of a sympathetic crowd.

"Poor dear!" says a woman, "she did hold on well, didn't she? It was beautiful."

Sibyl is on the scene by this time, and dismounts to assist the fallen one.

"You're not hurt, are you, dear?" she inquires, anxiously.

"I don't know whereabouts it is," replies Marion, clutching her dishevelled plaits, "but I feel as if I was all but killed—somewhere."

Brandy flasks are produced, and the sufferer is persuaded to take two or three sips of the spirit.

"Back all right, I hope," says Sir Wilford, who has delivered over the excited Fixture to a groom.

"I feel as limp as if it was broken," replies Marion. "When did I fall? was it the day before yesterday, or longer ago than that?"

"My love, it was just this minute."

"Then I've had a long dream," replies Marion, putting her hand to her head; "such a long dream. I feel as if I had been riding steeplechases on horrid runaway horses for the last three weeks."

"I shall never forgive myself for putting you on Fixture," says Sir Wilford, with a conscience-stricken air, "but I really thought he was the quietest old horse in the stable."

"Oh, I don't mind it a bit," answers Marion, who enjoys being the object of general attention. "In fact, I rather like it. It's very exciting, you know."

"Uncommonly," mutters Sir Wilford, who has had as bad a fright as he ever experienced in his life. "I thought you were done for when he came to that fence. If it hadn't been for the Bull—well, we won't talk about it."

Here a small boy brings Marion the fallen plait of false hair, which looks something like a defunct snake as he hands it to her, whereat there is a faint titter.

After twisting herself about a little in the arms of her supporters, Marion announces that she has no bones broken, to her knowledge.

"My spine may go all wrong to-morrow, and make me a cripple for life," she says, "but I think I can walk now."

"Shall I mount you again, ma'am?" asks the groom, who is holding Fixture. That quadruped is bathed in perspiration, stands like a block of wood, and droops his head despondently as if fully aware that he has made a fool of himself. "You might ride him home safe enough ma'am. He's quiet now."

"What, get upon *him* again?" cries Marion. "No, thank you."

"Bring her to the barouche," says Sir Wilford, and Marion is led to that vehicle, where the Miss Cardonnels inform her that they have been suffering agonies of anxiety on her behoof, though neither they nor Mrs. and Miss Radnor have left their seats.

"We knew we could be no use," Phœbe remarks, apologetically, "and we should have only increased the confusion if we had come to you."

"It's such a dangerous thing to ride when one is not used to it," remarks Vinnie, soothingly. "Wilford ought to have known better than to put you on that dreadful old horse."

Marion, who felt herself a person of importance amidst the crowd on the racecourse, shrinks into dire insignificance amongst these fine ladies in the carriage. She is screwed in, bodkin, between Phœbe and Mrs. Radnor. She knows she is looking an object in her battered hat and disordered tresses, and she can see nothing whatever of the race. The four ladies talk their usual family talk of uncles and cousins, nephews and nieces, and people they know; discuss the domestic affairs of the niece who is just married; review the prospects of the nephew who is going to marry; talk about the cousin who has just had a baby, and the unjust will of the uncle lately deceased; until Marion absolutely wishes herself away from these privileged ones, and thinks how nice it would be to be reading a novel on the parlour sofa at uncle Robert's, the sofa wheeled cosily up to the fire, and Jenny kneeling on the hearth toasting muffins.

"If my back *is* broken, it'll be a comfort to be a doctor's niece," she tells herself consolingly.

It is dusk when the last race is run, and the How party turn their faces homeward. A three-mile ride in the winter twilight lies between them and kettledrum; an excellent opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* with Sibyl, thinks Sir Wilford, who has found it impossible to secure half an hour of that young lady's society at the How. There she is always surrounded.

He contrives to leave the course close at her side, and to keep well in front of the other equestrians. Bull is quiet enough now, and quite content to lapse into a lazy walk, having been indulged with half a dozen tearing gallops across the level ground near the racecourse. Juno and Bull step side by side, solemnly as a pair of Flemish funeral horses, which have never done anything but "black work" since they were foaled.

It is a fine level road, a copse on one side, the moor upon the other. Wintry stars begin to twinkle in the gray, cottage fires gleam now and then across the road.

"Now is my time," thinks Sir Wilford.

"I hope you are not frightened at riding in the dark," he begins, with a gush of originality.

"Not at all. In the first place I don't call this gray twilight darkness, and in the second place I feel myself quite safe in your care."

"I am glad of that," says Sir Wilford. "I am very glad you feel yourself safe with me, Sibyl."

This is the casting of the die. After this utterance of her Christian name Sir Wilford feels he has committed himself to the deed. Receding now were as difficult as to go on.

"Yes, Sibyl, I am glad, for I want to be your protector all the days of my life. I want this dear little hand," taking the hand that droops carelessly at her side, with gold-handled whip lightly held, "I want this hand for mine. Oh, I think you must have seen ever so long ago that I love you. I have made no secret of my attachment, Sibyl. You are the first woman I ever met that I would care to make mistress of the How—you are the only woman I ever have asked—the only woman I ever shall ask to be my wife."

"Oh, stop, stop, Sir Wilford! Not one word more!" cries Sibyl. "Forgive me for having let you say so much."

While he has been talking she has decided on her course. A bold step, but the only one open to her. This young man is honourable, generous-minded. She will, she must trust him with her secret.

"Forgive you, Sibyl, for what?"

"Forgive me, if you ever can. I have been so wrong. I have acted so meanly. Forgive me for not having understood you better, for not having told you the truth about myself. I have led you on perhaps, most unwillingly, but still I may have led you on to make this generous offer."

"Generous be hanged!" cries the impetuous Sir Wilford. "There's no generosity in a man trying to get the thing he most desires. Don't talk about leading me on, Sibyl. Of course, you led me on—that is to say, you couldn't help seeing that I love you to distraction, and you've let me go on loving you. There's no leading a fellow on in that. You're like one of the stars up yonder, and just let yourself be admired. But you're not going to reject me, Sibyl. I can't believe that."

He does not believe it. Upon his own personal merits he has formed no decided opinion. He knows that he is tolerably good-looking, does justice to his tailor's handiwork, rides straight to hounds, and is free from vice. But he puts himself out of the scale altogether, and reckons upon his position and surroundings. That there is any woman in Yorkshire who would refuse to be mistress of the How and the How stables is more than he can believe.

"You won't reject me, Sibyl?" he repeats.

"Indeed, Sir Wilford, I have no alternative. I can make you but one answer."

"And that is ——"

"No."

"Oh, come, you can't mean it, Sibyl."

"I do mean it."

"You're in love with some other fellow. Not that cur, Fred Stormont, I hope?"

"If I thought about Mr. Stormont at all I should detest him."

"Who is it, then?"

"Sir Wilford, will you keep a secret if I confide one to you?"

"Have I any claim to be considered a gentleman?"

"Yes, yes, I know I may trust you."

"Go on," says Sir Wilford, sunk in gloom.

"You know very little of my history, I think, Sir Wilford," begins Sibyl, in a low but steady voice, "although you have done me the greatest honour in your power to confer upon me. Perhaps all you know is that I have been adopted by my uncle Stephen, and that he is likely to leave me a fortune. I have no certainty that he will do so, but I have every reason to believe it."

"Yes, yes. I know all about that."

"But you do not know, perhaps, that when my uncle came from India I was absent from Redcastle. I had gone to London to get my living as a governess. It was a dreary life, and would have seemed drearier, I dare say, but for one event which happened to diversify it. I was weak enough to fall in love with a gentleman who had as little to marry upon as I had."

"Poor child! Passing fancy—romantic attachment. You'll outlive that, Sibyl."

"It will outlive me, for we contrived to make the bond lasting. Without the knowledge of any of my family I was foolish enough to get married! The man I married is the son of Mr. Trenchard's worst enemy. My only chance of inheriting my uncle's fortune was the concealment of my marriage. I have therefore contrived to keep the secret, and you are the first to whom I have ever revealed it. If you betray me I am ruined."

"Betray you! What do you take me for?" cries Sir Wilford. "You are a married woman, and your husband is living?"

"Yes."

"And he suffers you to keep up this deception—to stoop to this meanness. Forgive me ——"

"For calling things by their right names—yes, I forgive you. There are no words too hard for my conduct; and yet, perhaps, if you could measure the depth of misery I had sunk into before I made up my mind to try for uncle Trenchard's fortune, even you might pity me."

"Pity! Yes, Sibyl, I pity you with all my heart; but I can't help despising your husband."

"Do not despise him. What I have done has been done without his knowledge or consent. He only traced me to my present home a very little while ago, and he then told me that he would repudiate me and my fortune when the day came for me to possess it."

"And yet you continue the deception?"

"Would it not be positive idiocy to abandon it just now, when the end is in all probability very near? My uncle has not many years to live."

"He looks rather shaky, poor old fellow—liver, I dare say."

"Why should I make a revelation that would be a shock to him, and do no good to any one else? If my husband really loves me he will be true to me as I am to him, and all will be well for us by-and-bye."

"And you'll secure the old man's money," says Sir Wilford. "Trust a woman for looking after the main chance."

"You despise me, Sir Wilford," falters Sibyl, humiliated.

"No, no; nothing of the kind. Only when one comes to talk of money, it takes a little of the bloom off, you know. I had looked up to you as an angel—something quite ethereal, you know. And when one comes down to pounds, shillings, and pence—well, it's rather a long way to come, you know."

"You'll keep my secret?"

"Consider it buried in the deepest grave that ever was dug."

"And if you are tempted to despise, if you do despise me, as I fear you must, try to remember that you have never known what it is to be poor, that there is a depth of misery; abject fear for to-morrow's bread; the dread of being turned out of one's wretched shelter into the street, the horror of being clothed in rags, driven to the workhouse. Consider that you have never known these things. I have, and my deception grew out of them. If I told the truth to-morrow I might have to go back to all those unforgotten horrors. If I play my part steadily to the end, I may secure a happy future for my husband and myself."

"Upon my word it's a very trying position, Miss Faunthorpe, and I feel for you with all my heart. It would have been kinder to me if you had given me a hint of the truth a little sooner, and spared me—well, spared me a very bitter disappointment. Yet I can but thank you for having trusted me at the last."

"One word more, Sir Wilford. Pray do not let my uncle suppose that you have asked me to be your wife. He would never forgive me for my rejection of you."

"I'll take care of that. He shall think me the most miserable object in creation—a male flirt—a man who dangles about a pretty woman meaning nothing but his own amusement. I'll bear the brunt of the old gentleman's anger, Miss Faunthorpe, rely upon it; and if ever you want a friend, remember that, in spite of his disappointment, Wilford Cardonnel is yours to the death!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

JOEL PILGRIM.

THAT evening after Tilberry races is the gayest night there has yet been at the How. There is a dinner party, matrons and maidens wear their finest dresses, each assuming that one last and newest fashion which the Princess Metternich, or some one of equal importance, has made the rage in Paris. Even poor Marion, revived by strong tea and an hour's comfortable slumber, puts on her blue and salmon dinner dress, and feels that she is looking lovely.

Yet, although most of the ladies at the How are tolerably satisfied with their own appearance, there is none among them who would venture to deny Sibyl Faunthorpe's claim to that apple of discord from whose pips sprang Troja's fall, and the slaughter of many heroes. She is paler than usual this evening, but her eyes are bright with a feverous excitement, and there is more brilliancy in her pallor than in other women's carnation.

Mr. Trenchard observes that look of unusual excitement, and sees that the hand which waves the large white fan trembles a little now and then. He has heard from some friendly gossips how Sir Wilford and Sibyl rode on ahead of all the others during the return home, and he draws his own conclusions from Sibyl's suppressed agitation and this fact. The baronet has proposed, he tells himself. Sibyl is to all intents and purposes mistress of fortune and the How. Mr. Trenchard rejoices in this consummation as if it took a load off his mind. He smiles sweetly upon his niece, and once, when he is near her for a few minutes before they go to dinner, he ventures to hint at his thoughts.

"How pretty you are looking, my pet!" he whispers, "but a little over-excited. You have something to tell me, haven't you?"

"Nothing out of the common, dear uncle."

"What, not about your ride home? Come, you see a little bird has been before you."

"Little birds are generally more inventive than veracious, uncle."

And at this point the bachelor appointed to that honour offers Sibyl his arm, and the procession files off to the dining-room. The long drawing-room, once a chapel, is at its fullest about an hour after dinner. Sibyl has just risen from the piano, where she has played Chopin and Schumann to the delight, real or affected, of her auditory. Stephen Trenchard stands with his back to the low marble chimney-piece, surveying the room in which his lovely niece forms so important a feature, flattering himself with the fancy that this room will be hers before long, that she will be its acknowledged mistress as she is now its queen.

He looks round for Sir Wilford, wondering not to see that captive of love exhibiting his fetters more conspicuously, but Sir Wilford is standing on the hearth-rug at the other end of the room—there are two fireplaces in the drawing-room—talking hunting talk with a brace of rubicund sportsmen who look as if their systems were permeated with old port.

While Mr. Trenchard is wondering that Sir Wilford should hold himself thus aloof from the object of his devotion, the butler throws open a distant door, and announces—

"Mr. Joel Pilgrim."

Everybody looks up at the announcement, and at the entrance of the person to whom the name belongs. The name is strange to all ears save Mr. Trenchard's. The person is a stranger to all eyes save Mr. Trenchard's and Sibyl's.

Not a welcome announcement, by any means, judging by the sudden angry look that darkens Stephen Trenchard's countenance, spreading over it an additional shade of sallowness, deepening the bistre beneath his eyes, hardening the lines about his mouth.

He crosses the room hurriedly, and takes the stranger by the hand. "My dear Pilgrim, what brings you here? At so late an hour, too."

"I have to apologize for what must naturally appear an intrusion," replies Mr. Pilgrim, in a voice which is peculiarly soft and conciliatory, "but the commercial man's habitual selfishness is my only excuse—if a vice can be an excuse for a solecism. I wanted to see you to ask your advice upon an affair of considerable moment. I went to Redcastle, found you were staying here, and hired a fly to bring me on. The roads were dark, the horse slow, and the flyman stupid. Thus I am above an hour later than I need have been, though in any case I must have been late, as I only reached Redcastle at seven o'clock.

"You might have waited till to-morrow," says Mr. Trenchard, unappeased by this apology.

"I was too anxious to wait. I hope Sir Wilford Cardonnel and his family will pardon my impertinence."

He looks towards Sir Wilford, who has come forward at the announcement of a guest.

"Very happy to see any friend of Mr. Trenchard's," says the good-natured baronet. "I'm afraid you have had a cold drive."

"It is not particularly warm upon your moors for a man born in Calcutta."

"Have you dined, by the way?"

"I dined by the way. I stopped in Redcastle just long enough to dine."

"You mustn't go back to-night," says Sir Wilford, hospitably. "You can have your chat with your friend Mr. Trenchard in the library, and then come back to us to finish the evening. I'll order a room to be got ready for you."

"You are really too good," replies Mr. Pilgrim, hesitating, and with a glance at Mr. Trenchard.

"But you have no valise," interjects Stephen Trenchard, "impossible for you to stay. Come to the library, and I'll soon settle this business for you."

Mr. Pilgrim smiles a subdued smile, murmurs his grateful acknowledgment of Sir Wilford's kindness, and bows himself out after Stephen Trenchard. There is a general sense of relief among the company when that sleek head and swarthy face are withdrawn from their midst.

"What a peculiar-looking person!" exclaims Mrs. Stormont, who is sitting near Sibyl.

"What an unpleasant-looking person!" responds the outspoken Mrs. Radnor.

"Do you know him, Sibyl?" inquires Mrs. Stormont.

"I have seen him—once before. He is an Indian friend of my uncle's."

"He has never stayed at Lancaster Lodge, I think," hazards Mrs. Stormont.

"No, he has never stayed there. He only called one evening on business."

"He must live in the neighbourhood then, I suppose?"

"I should hardly think so."

Curiosity has been awakened by this late visitor. There is something out of the common in his appearance, and Mr. Trenchard's vexation at his coming has been tolerably apparent to every one.

Mr. Trenchard and his friend are closeted in the library for about an hour, then a bell rings, and the stranger is conducted back to his fly, whose departing wheels are heard in the drawing-room half an hour after all other guests have gone, and just as the house party are bidding one another good night. It is a quarter past twelve.

"I wonder Mr. Trenchard has not let that poor man stay," says Mrs. Stormont; "a nasty drive back to Redcastle at this time of night—such a horrid road after dark,—and those flymen are tipsy half their time."

"Perhaps Mr. Trenchard wouldn't much care if the man were turned over into a ditch," rejoins Mrs. Radnor. "He's the most unpleasant-looking person I ever saw. Did you see how those black eyes of his seemed to take us all in? He's just my idea of a Thug."

Mrs. Stormont has no very clear notion of Thugs, but admits that the stranger's expression has impressed her unfavourably.

At breakfast the next morning there is general surprise when Mr. Trenchard announces his intention of returning to Redcastle in the course of the day. He has had letters from India which demand his attention—he has some property over there which the Government talk of buying,—and it will be very advantageous for him if the transaction comes off. It is a matter which requires prompt negotiation.

"I am extremely sorry to curtail such a pleasant visit, especially on account of these girls," he adds.

The Misses Cardonnel express their deep regret, but do not urge Mr. Trenchard to reconsider his decision. Sir Wilford expresses his sorrow, but even he does not press his guests to remain, much to the surprise of the lookers on, who speculate curiously on Mr. Trenchard's motive for going, and Sir Wilford's reason for taking his sweetheart's departure so easily.

"Don't you see that it's all settled between them?" says Mrs. Radnor to Mrs. Chasubel. "He has made her an offer and been accepted, and I dare say the old man wants to consult his lawyers about settlements. He'll give her a fortune on her marriage, no doubt."

Sibyl is very glad to go, though she feels much more comfortable in Sir Wilford's society now that he and she understand each other. Marion is bitterly disappointed at this abrupt termination to her visit, and is inclined to grumble about the money wasted on those lovely dresses, till she reflects that the money was not hers, and that it is something to have secured the dresses. There will be some pleasure in disporting herself before Maria Harrison in that brown silk costume. So the sisters go upstairs and pack, aided, or in some measure hindered, by Miss Cardonnel's maid, whose services that young lady politely offers for the occasion. Mrs. Parker is rewarded for her civilities, morning cups of tea and other small attentions, and before luncheon all is ready for departure. Mr. Trenchard has sent a groom to Redcastle to order his carriage to fetch him at three o'clock. Sir Wilford is absent from the luncheon table for the first time since the coming of his guests. Phœbe and Lavinia are unusually cheerful; indeed, Sibyl fancies that there is a general accession of cheerfulness among the feminine portion of the community. The gentlemen, on the other hand, deplore Miss Faunthorpe's departure with a flattering vehemence. They declare that a star is about to vanish from their sky, and a good deal more to the same effect. Even Mr. Chasubel has admired Sibyl, and has told people in confidence that she is the image of a Madonna by Guido in the Vatican, a nice way of telling people that he has been in Rome, and is an art critic in his way. Fred Stormont sits next to Marion and bewails his loss.

"We ought to have gone out riding together ever so many times more," he says. "I should have made you a first-rate horsewoman," an assertion that savours of rashness when it is remembered that Mr. Stormont has not yet succeeded in making himself a capable horseman.

At three o'clock Mr. Trenchard's carriage is at the door, the portmanteaus are in, the servants feed, and all things ready. Just at this last moment Sir Wilford appears, looking very much like his own gamekeeper, in velveteen coat, cords, and leather gaiters, and with his gun in his hand.

"I hope you'll all excuse me for forgetting the luncheon bell," he says to the company generally, most of whom have come out into the hall to say good-bye to Mr. Trenchard and his nieces. "The birds were very wild, and Glenny and I forgot the progress of the enemy. I made quite a rush home to say good-bye to Mr. Trenchard."

"It will not be a long parting, I hope," replies Stephen Trenchard. "You must come and dine with us directly you are free."

"I shall be charmed. Good-bye Miss Faunthorpe."

Sibyl and Sir Wilford shake hands, at least thirty pairs of eyes watching the operation. They shake hands in a formal and orthodox manner, and no one can detect so much as a secret pressure—love's Masonic grip. He leads her to the carriage, and when she is seated, and the coachman has gathered up the reins, he leans over for the last word, and one last pressure of the little hand he had hoped to make his own.

"Trust me," he says. "You have almost broke my heart, but you may trust me."

Mr. Trenchard is silent and gloomy throughout the homeward drive. Sibyl, although glad to be separated from Sir Wilford, looks forward despondingly to the solitude and monotony of her life at Lancaster Lodge after the gaiety and variety of the last few days. At the How she has not had leisure for sad thoughts! no time for self-reproach, regret, and all the illness that attends her selfish course. She has been the centre of an admiring circle, her vanity gratified to the uttermost, and life has seemed one round of pleasure.

Marion is loquacious as usual, and rattles on with her criticisms upon the How and its visitors, from Mrs. Radnor's exaggerated aquiline nose, which always blushed after luncheon, "as if it was ashamed of belonging to anyone who drank so much sherry," says Marion, to the Miss Vernons' high-heeled boots, "in which I know they suffer agonies," adds Marion.

Neither Stephen Trenchard nor Sibyl responds to these remarks, but the babble runs on intermittingly till they come to the lower end of the town, and to uncle Robert's green garden gate.

Jenny, the omnipresent, rushes out at the sound of the carriage wheels, her hair flying in the wind, and receives her sister with a volley of "goodness graciouses," and "sure to goodnesses," and numerous embraces which are like the gambadoes of an infant hippopotamus, or the friskings of a friendly sea-lion.

Mr. Trenchard gives a sigh of relief when Marion and her boxes have been deposited; nor is Sibyl sorry to dispense with her sister's vivacious society.

"You will find a visitor at my house, Sibyl," says Stephen Trenchard, as they drive towards the Bar, "a visitor whom I expect you to treat with all consideration, as he is a particular friend of mine."

"Mr. Pilgrim, uncle?" asks Sibyl, startled.

"Yes, Mr. Pilgrim. I did not wish him to take advantage of Sir Wilford's hospitality, nor did I want him to go back to London without proper entertainment, so I invited him to spend a week or so at Lancaster Lodge."

"And that was the reason you left the How so soon?"

"That and other reasons influenced me. There is that property I spoke about at luncheon."

"To be sure; I forgot that."

"I hope my leaving so suddenly has not been a disappointment to you, Sibyl?"

"Not at all, dear uncle."

"And that I have in no way prevented the triumph which I fully expected you to win. Pray be candid with me, my dear child. Sir Wilford has proposed to you, and you have accepted him? You ought to have hastened to tell me of an event which you know must give me unalloyed pleasure."

"My dear uncle, I have nothing to tell. I am as far from being Lady Cardonnel as ever I was in my life."

"I'm very sorry to hear it. What was Sir Wilford talking about when you rode home from Tilberry together last night? Mr. Stormont told me that you and he rode ahead of the others."

"We were talking about the commonest subjects in the world, uncle. Horses, races, Marion's adventure on Fixture, and the merits of Juno—the mare I was riding."

"Humph! I fully made up my mind that he had taken that opportunity of proposing to you."

"I am sorry you should feel disappointed, uncle. But I really don't understand why you should wish me to marry. It's not very flattering to me."

"You ought to understand, child. My time is growing short, and I should like to see you established in a brilliant position before I go."

"My position will be brilliant enough when I am in possession of your wealth," thinks Sibyl, but she acknowledges her uncle's anxiety for her welfare with a tender murmur, expressive of the desire that he should live for ever.

Mr. Pilgrim comes out to the door to receive Mr. Trenchard and his niece, and for the first time in her life Sibyl touches his hand. It is curiously soft and flaccid, and gives her an unpleasant sensation, as if she had touched some strange animal, some member of the stoat or mole tribe.

"So glad to see you back!" he says to Mr. Trenchard, in the blandest voice. "I was afraid the attractions of that fine old country house——"

"You ought to know that when I say a thing I abide by it," answers Mr. Trenchard, curtly. "Mr. Pilgrim, my niece, Miss Faunthorpe."

"If you knew how I have been longing for this opportunity, Miss Faunthorpe."

"Don't waste time on compliments, Joel; Sibyl will scarcely have time to change her dress for dinner."

Sibyl runs upstairs to her room, cheerful with blazing fire and lighted candles—a very different chamber to return to from that dark first-floor front of Mrs. Bonny's, where one had to grope for lucifer match and candlestick in the winter dusk. Yet so unreasonable a thing is human nature, that on this January evening Sibyl would gladly exchange these luxurious surroundings of hers for the one pair room in Chelsea, could the wheel of time make a backward revolution and give her back her husband's confidence and love.

The stranger's presence has impressed her disagreeably. There is something in her uncle's manner to Mr. Pilgrim, and in Mr. Pilgrim's manner to her uncle, that inspires distrust. The evening at Lancaster Lodge is very quiet and dreary after the life and bustle of the How. Mr. Trenchard and his Indian friend retire to the study after dinner to talk business, and Sibyl is left alone with her books and piano. She finds comfort in neither, and perhaps, were Alexis to appear before her to-night on the same errand that brought him to Redcastle a few weeks ago, she would exchange all her chances of wealth to follow his uncertain fortunes.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALEXIS COMES TO GRIEF.

THAT interview at Redcastle has embittered Alexis Secretan's feelings towards his mercenary wife. Love has given place to contempt. A woman who could set the hope of wealth against her fidelity to him is unworthy of another thought of his.

He goes back to Cheswold reckless, angry, wounded to the core of his heart, and he tells himself that he is indifferent to his wife's fate, that he cares not if he never see her false face again.

The blow that has hit him hardest, he thinks, is the knowledge of his boy's death. That son whose fair young face he has pictured in many a day-dream—seen vividly in many a vision of his sleep,—the son who was to inherit Cheswold in the days to come—the son for whose sake it would have been so proud and pleasant a labour to add field to field, and extend the boundaries of that modest manor—this unknown but fondly loved son is lost to him, nay, has never lived save as the infant of a day old. The chubby yearling, the bonny boy of two summers, whose image, limned by fancy, has been almost a living thing for him, has had no existence.

The loss of this shadow hangs upon him heavily. He is no longer the gay young squire who enjoyed the novel pleasures of wealth and social status. He is gloomy and absent-minded, and avoids all intercourse with his neighbours, save in the hunting-field, where he rides like a man who holds his neck as a trifle not worth his care.

In this desolation of his mind he turns to two sources for comfort—the first, his faithful friend, Richard Plowden, whom he detains at Cheswold for an unlimited period, to the peril of the Brompton fernery; the second, his stable, to which he devotes himself a good deal at this time.

His two hunters are considered the handsomest animals and the straightest goers in this part of the country, and his reputation is advanced among the rustic population by his reckless riding.

"I know you'll come to grief some of these days, Alexis," says the faithful Dick, who looks on his friend's proceedings with much dread. "Blokus, the gardener, told me yesterday that you ride with what he calls a 'plaguey loose rein,' and that you don't know the country well enough to run such risks. I don't like that tall brute of yours a bit."

"Not Bayard?" exclaims Alexis, who resents this abuse of his last acquisition, a fine bay horse, sixteen two and a half, and described at Tattersall's as the cleverest thing in hunters. "Why, he's the best horse I ever rode. Such a mouth! You might ride him with a skein of silk."

"But you see you haven't ridden many horses," responds the prudent Richard. "You're half a foreigner. You haven't been brought up like these country squires, who have spent half their lives in the pigskin. It is pigskin, isn't it?"

"Yes, Dick. And do you suppose I didn't ride when I was in the army, and hunt into the bargain? And do you suppose I didn't ride in the colonies, where a man thinks nothing of forty miles in the saddle?"

"I don't know anything about the colonies, Alex, but you weren't brought up to following the hounds like these Hampshire gentlemen, and I feel wretched every day you ride that new horse of yours, expecting to see you brought home on a shutter."

"And if I were, Dick, would it matter to any one except you?"

"Alex!" cries Dick, reproachfully.

"Yes, old fellow, I know you'd be sorry, but not so sorry as the heir-at-law would be glad. Who is my heir-at-law, by the way? I must make a will, Dick. Some part of all these good things of ours must go to the only being I care for."

"His wife," thinks the simple-minded Dick.

Alexis rides over to Winchester that very afternoon, and is closeted for an hour with Mr. Scrodgers, the lawyer, to whom he gives instructions for a concise and simple will.

He leaves his real estate to his next of kin on his father's side, who shall bear the name of Secretan, or, in the absence of any such Secretan, to his next of kin on his mother's side, exclusive of Mrs. Gorsuch and her children, who shall assume the name of Secretan.

"I feel myself bound to do this much out of reverence for the good old name," he says, "out of gratitude to my cousin Matilda, who honoured the name in my unworthy person. But my personal property I shall leave to the one friend whose sincerity I am assured of, and who stood by me when I was at the bottom of the ladder. I owe it perhaps to him that Miss Secretan's bequest found me an honest man, and not a blackguard or a swindler."

"Very right, very proper," murmurs Mr. Scrodgers, wondering whether he is to be put down for a mourning ring, or a legacy of a hundred guineas or so. He is old, and Alexis is young, it is true, whereby the chances of his inheriting any such legacy seem slender. But then Mr. Scrodgers is careful of himself, and these young men hunt, and drink more brandy and soda than is good for them, and shoot with new-fangled guns, and drive tandem with untried horses after dark. There might be a chance of his getting the legacy, should so proper an idea occur to his client. But Alexis furnishes his instructions without remembering the claims of Mr. Scrodgers. He leaves Richard Plowden all his personal property, furniture, books, horses, and pictures.

"They ought to realise enough to make that honest fellow independent for the rest of his days," thinks Alexis; "and now if Bayard makes an end of me some fine morning, I shall at least have done one good thing in my life."

Mr. Scrodgers drives over to the Grange next morning in his highly respectable four-wheeled chaise, and the will is executed, but Mr. Secretan tells his friend nothing about its contents, nor is Richard Plowden curious. There breathes not on this earth a less mercenary creature. He is grateful beyond measure for his friend's affection, proud and happy that his presence at the Grange can give pleasure to Alexis. He plods on at his school books every morning in the snug quietude of the study, and in the afternoon takes long and solitary walks, while Alexis spends his day in the hunting-field.

The neighbourhood is full of rustic beauty, even in winter, and Richard, who has spent almost all the days of his life amidst a wilderness of brick and mortar, is delighted with these country lanes, these noble old trees, beautiful in their leafless majesty, these grassy hills crowned with dark pine trees, the blue river that winds through the green valleys, these peaceful English homesteads nestling in sheltered spots, and here and there a picturesque old water-mill, with a big brown wheel that never seems to go round.

Like many lame people Dick can get over a good deal of ground, and get along as fast as those who have the full use of their legs. He grows strong in this pure air, and gets young again. His complexion loses its sickly tint. Those transparent hands of his lose much of their delicacy.

"If you go on in this way, Dick, I shall find my refined and intellectual friend of the Brompton Road developing into a Hampshire chawbacon," says Alexis, jocosely, as they breakfast together luxuriously, in front of a blazing wood fire, one hunting morning—the master of the Grange arrayed in pink and tops ready for the day's sport, Dick in a comfortable suit of gray homespun.

"I do so enjoy your lovely scenery," replies Dick. "There's only one thing that makes me uneasy."

"Your mother——"

"No, it's not about mother herself. She has some extra good lodgers in the drawing-room floor, and is as happy as the day is long. What I'm afraid of is that she'll give the ferns too much water. Mother has such an idea of watering plants. She thinks the more you drench them the better they grow, and she's rather self-opinionated in those matters, dear soul! I tremble for my polypodium."

"I'm glad it isn't any other kind of Polly you tremble for, Dick," replies Alexis. "What a close old fellow you are, by the way! you never told me anything about your experience in that tender passion which makes fools of the wisest of us sooner or later."

"Simply because I have had nothing to tell."

"Nonsense! Were you never in love?"

"Never. I have admired feminine loveliness and goodness in the abstract, but it never came near enough to me to tempt me to fall in love with it."

"Happy man!" exclaims Alexis. "To escape love is to shun man's worst peril;—

"'For soon or late Love is his own avenger.'"

It is the middle of February, one of those days on which the mists of morning linger on the face of the land, as if they loved it. Gleams of sun pierce that silvery veil, and the westerly breeze seems rather autumnal than wintry. The two friends part in excellent spirits, Alexis riding off gaily on his covert hack, Titmouse, a pretty little gray mare. Bayard has been sent on before.

"How's the bay this morning, Joe?" asks Mr. Secretan as he mounts.

"Fresh as paint, sir; but I thinks as you did ought to have 'ad him hexercised a bit yesterday."

"Nonsense, Joe! I don't care a straw for a horse when all the spirit has been taken out of him. That boy of yours gallops like the deuce when he gets the chance, I know. I don't care about having Bayard spoiled that way."

"I hopes Bay-hard won't spoil you," mutters the groom, as Titmouse carries his master down the drive.

"I hope you're not afraid of that bay horse, Marshall," says Richard, when Titmouse and her rider are out of sight.

"No, sir, I ain't afraid of no 'oss going, and I don't say there's any 'arm in Bay-hard. But the 'oss is young and silly, and my master—well, I ain't going to be disrespectrous to so good a master as him, or I should say he's young and silly too."

"But he's a good rider, isn't he?"

"He's a good 'and at sittin' on a 'oss, Mr. Plowden, but there's summot more nor that wanted to make a good rider."

This conversation, superadded to honest Dick's own fears, makes him feel rather uncomfortable; but when he has started on his rustic ramble the sun shines out of the mist, the west wind is so balmy and caressing, earth is altogether so lovely in her wintry garb, that Dick's spirits rise, and he tells himself that a bold brave fellow like Alexis is not the kind of man to come to harm in the hunting-field. It is your timid rider rather who is liable to misfortune.

So Dick goes his way, and his way of late has generally been the same way.

There is a tiny village about three miles from Cheswold—a village so small that compared with it Cheswold is quite an important settlement. This other village consists of a cluster of labourers' cottages, with whitewashed walls, thatched roofs steeply sloping, and long strips of garden which would be quite an acquisition to many a suburban villa. There is a queer little old church at which there is service every alternate Sunday afternoon, and there are a water-mill and a homestead with a farm of about thirty acres appertaining thereto. This mill is the chief feature of the scene, and it is to the mill that Dick has come. It is a picturesque old place, big water-wheel, gurgling mill-race, and placid pool. The willows that lean across the water look centuries old. The low white dwelling-house, with its steeply sloping thatch, its white plastered walls crossed and recrossed by timbers painted black, must have been here in the days of Elizabeth. The snowdrops peeping over the tall box border yonder are half a century old, and have spread and multiplied in the shelter of the southern wall. There is a roomy old porch with wooden benches, and it is in this porch Dick takes his rest after his three miles walk.

It is about a month since he came here one biting January afternoon—the roads white with snow, the hedges loaded with a fine crop of icicles, the ditches ice-bound, and black as ink. On so cold a day it surprised him a little to see a girl of delicate and refined appearance at work with garden scissors and basket in the little bit of ground in front of the homestead by the mill. She was plainly dressed in a gray stuff gown and black apron, and wore a little scarlet shawl tied across her chest, but her head was bare—a very pretty head, Dick thought, with dark brown hair, that made a rippling line across the forehead, and was gathered in a loose knot at the back. He was not quite clear in his mind as to whether the fair gardener was pretty or not. Her features belonged to no regular type; her nose was neither severely Grecian nor commandingly Roman, but rather inclined to the *retroussé*, but it was an inoffensive nose at worst. Her complexion, heightened to a rich bloom by the nipping air, was a thing for poets to rave about—for painters to vainly imitate. Her eyes were dark gray, with thick black lashes; her eyebrows dark and strongly marked; her mouth beautiful, though Dick was not wise enough to know it. He only saw that her smile was sweet, and his chief impression was of a look of goodness which pervaded the face—or so he thought. She looked so amiable that he, the shyest of men, ventured to address her.

"Rather a cold day for gardening," he said.

"I don't find it so," she answered, smiling. "If my poor arbutus can stand the cold, I don't think it will hurt me;" and she went on snipping off dead leaves, and smartening the garden by those little touches which maintain order and beauty even at a flowerless season.

"We shall soon have the snowdrops," she said, cheerfully.

"Ah," said Dick, "they bloom about this time of year, do they?"

He had made himself acquainted with the habits of ferns, but had very vague notions about flowers. The girl looked at him wonderingly, and then, as he walked away a little further, contemplating the picture of mill-wheel and water, she perceived that slight lameness from which he suffered.

"Would you like to rest after your walk?" she asked, timidly. "You have come some distance, perhaps?"

"From Cheswold."

"That's a good three miles. Our porch is quite at your service if you would like to sit down."

She opened the gate as she spoke, and Dick walked in. He felt as if he could not for worlds have resisted the invitation, so he went in, very shyly, and seated himself on the bench in the porch. The door was open, and opened straight into the neatest, prettiest sitting-room Dick had ever seen—or, at any rate, ever remembered having seen—in his life. Everything was so bright and fresh, the brass fender, the cheerful fire, the old cups and saucers on the mantelpiece, the white ceiling, the painted walls, the chintz-covered sofa and chairs, the small round table with neatly arranged piles of books—not show books, but looking rather like volumes in the daily use of a student—and a drawing-board—actually a drawing-board, the old engravings, the little cabinet of shells in the corner yonder. All the furniture in the room might hardly have realized five-and-twenty pounds at an auction, but the general effect was delightful to Richard Plowden's eye and mind.

The young lady—he felt sure now that she was a young lady, n spite of her homely dress and that lazy old water-wheel—went on with her gardening, nailed up stray shoots here and there against the plaster wall, and took no more notice of Dick than f he had been a hundred miles away. Dick was much too shy o make conversation, so he sat in silence, lazily watching the girl's graceful figure as it moved about the garden, in a pleasant reverie.

Presently there came a sound from within—a small shrill voice calling "mammie." An inner door opened, and a little oddling thing, just emerged from babyhood, came running out o the porch.

At sight of Dick it screamed as if it had seen lions, and stood tock still, paralyzed with terror—a significant evidence that a tranger was a rare bird at Dorley Mill.

The girl ran to him, took him up in her arms, and smothered him with kisses.

"Mammie!" said Dick to himself. "Then this charming girl s a married woman! I didn't observe the wedding-ring."

He glanced at the hands which were clasped round the child. No, there was no ring there.

"What a dear little—thing!" he said, doubtful about the sex.

"Yes, he is a darling little fellow."

"Your nephew, I suppose?"

"No," and the girl's cheek crimsoned, "he's an adopted hild."

This was all Dick ever heard about the boy. He might have nown more perhaps had he been curious enough or audacious nough to inquire, but he was neither. Yet he wondered a little, dopted children being rarities, to have stumbled upon one in the iny village of Dorley.

He came to Dorley several times, finding this particular walk ie most picturesque of all his wanderings, and he rested for alf an hour, or even longer, in the porch, while Linda Challice, e had found out her name in due course, sat at work in the retty parlour and chatted with him pleasantly, quite at her ease. here was something about Richard Plowden which made eople friendly with him at once.

They talked about the country, which Linda knew by heart, nd about London, which was a strange and wonderful city she ad never beheld. They talked of books and flowers and ferns, nd by this time they had become as familiar as friends of long tanding.

Linda had never invited Mr. Plowden to come beyond the orch, however. She was not quite sure whether her grandather, a funny little old man, who was always in a floury ondition on week days, would approve of such a step on her art.

And now, on this fine February morning, Dick makes his appearance, rosy with his brisk walk, and takes his accustomed seat in the porch.

"If you come to Dorley some Sunday afternoon," says Linda, after a little while, "you can make grandfather's acquaintance. He's always in the mill on week days."

"He seems a kind old gentleman," says Dick, who had received a friendly nod from the little miller.

"He is kindness itself. There never was such an indulgent grandfather."

"And you have lived with him——"

"All my life. My mother was his only daughter. She married an artist who came to Dorley to fish and sketch one summer. She was very pretty, they say."

"I can easily believe it," murmured Dick.

"Oh, much prettier than I!" says Linda, blushing, "if you are trying to pay me a compliment. I have a portrait of her in my room, painted by my father. It was quite a love match, and I dare say people said my father had degraded himself by marrying a country miller's daughter, for he was what people call a fashionable artist, and might have made a very different marriage. But they were very happy, and I believe my father was almost broken-hearted when my mother died a few months after my birth. I suppose he didn't quite know what to do with me, poor fellow, so when my grandfather and grandmother offered to take care of me he consented to my being brought up by them until I was old enough to go to school. I was a sickly baby, they say, and that decided him. Well, my good grandmother brought me down here within a month of my mother's death, and it has always seemed as if I was born here, for I can remember no other place. My first memories are of the garden and the mill—the big black wheel and the foaming race—and those snowdrops growing within the box border."

"And you were sent to school——"

"Never. Before the school time came my poor father had died in Italy. He had earned a great deal of money at one time, but his reputation had not lasted as long as his life, and he left very little behind him. I never went to any school except the little village day school, where I learned to read and write; and if it had not been for the last Vicar of Cheswold—a dear old man—I must have grown up in ignorance. But one day when he came over to see my grandfather he heard my father's name mentioned, and was interested in me directly. He was a grea admirer of my father's pictures. He asked how I was being educated, and when he found that I was not being educated a all, he offered to give me a couple of hours' instruction twice a week if I would go as far as Cheswold Vicarage. I was only to glad—for I was fifteen years old at this time, and felt the burden of my ignorance,—and for four years I was that dear old man's pupil. He taught me Latin, French, and Italian, and gave me the best books in his library to read. I owe it to him that I never wasted an hour upon a worthless book. He was indeed a friend. His memory is dearer to me than words can tell."

Dick listens with profoundest interest, and is about to express his admiration of the good vicar, when a noise in the distance startles Linda and him. It is the sound of several voices talking in excited tones. Linda throws down her work and follows Dick to the garden gate. A labourer in a smock-frock comes running round the corner, by the brief row of cottages which the inhabitants dignify with the name of street.

"What's the matter, John?" asks Linda; "anything wrong with your children?"

"No, miss, they be right enough, but there's a accident yonder with some gentlemen hunting, a young gent chucked over an edge, among the rushes in that there ditch just beyond your grandfeyther's field."

"Is he much hurt?"

"His arm's broke, and there's somethink wrong inside of 'im, miss, some of his internal bones scrunched, I'm afeard, for he's been a-spitting blood like one o'clock."

"What are they going to do with him, poor fellow?"

"The other gents is a-bringin' him 'ere, miss, and I ran on afore to tell 'ee."

Dick is pale as death. Those terrible presentiments of his! have they been cruelly verified? He can scarcely find voice to ask the question,—

"Do you know who the gentleman is?"

"One on 'em said it were the young squire of Ches'old."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE.

Yes, Richard Plowden's prognostications of evil are realized. Not quite so fatally as they might have been, however, for Dick had seen in a vision of woe the figure of his friend stretched on a shutter, pulseless, lifeless, the generous heart at rest for ever. The figure which the gentlemen of the hunt carry along the narrow path by the mill-pool holds happily the spark of life still, but so white is the face lying on the huntsman's scarlet shoulder that poor Dick, running out to meet his friend, gives a cry of horror.

"Is he dead?" he asks, distractedly.

"Not a bit of it. He's only fainted. I'm afraid there's a few of his ribs broken. Do you belong to Benfield's?"

Mr. Benfield is the miller.

"No, but I've just come from there, they are getting ready for him. He's my dearest friend. Where's the nearest doctor?"

"None nearer than Cheswold. One of the men has ridden off after him."

They carry Alexis to the pretty old house beside the mill, and up a single flight of shallow oak stairs to the best bedchamber, the freshest and brightest of rooms, with two broad latticed windows overlooking the mill-stream and the willows, with their background of green hills. A man might find worse quarters than these in the hour of distress. Even in the midst of his grief Dick glances round the room admiringly, and thinks what a treasure old Benfield, the miller, has in his granddaughter, for it is Linda's taste, of course, which beautifies his home.

They lay Alexis on the pure white counterpane, and Linda sponges his temples with eau de Cologne, until presently the heavy eyelids are lifted, and the patient looks about him wonderingly.

He recognises Dick, and fancies himself at home at the Grange.

This young woman in gray is one of the housemaids, no doubt. How soft and white her hand is! He did not think he had so pretty a servant in his staff.

"Well, old fellow," he says faintly, and with a wan smile, "you were right. Such a cockney as I oughtn't to go across country with your born Nimrods. Bayard's youth and silliness sent me flying over rather a stiff bit of timber, and I'm afraid Bayard himself is demolished. By Jove, it was a thundering smash! I wonder if I have any bones whole? I feel as if they were all broken up in short lengths, like barley-sugar."

"Thank God you can make a joke of it," exclaims Dick. "But you mustn't talk. You've been spitting blood, you know."

"I thought there was something unpleasant going on internally. How did they contrive to bring me home? I haven't the slightest recollection of the transit."

"Home?" echoes Dick, puzzled.

"Yes. I am at home, am I not? Or how do I find you by my side?"

"By a fortunate accident, dear old fellow. You are at Dorley Mill, close by the place where you fell, and in good hands, I am sure. And now not another word till the doctor has seen you."

Old John Benfield, the miller, who has left his work on hearing of the accident, comes in at this moment, carrying a steaming glass of brandy and water, which he believes to be a specific for all earthly ills.

"Sup it up, sir," he says; and Alexis is about to comply, when a firm hand takes away the glass.

"Not on any account, grandfather. He has been spitting blood."

"All the more reason why he should have something warm and comforting," says Mr. Benfield.

"You must get him some cold brandy and water, grandfather."

"Very well, little lass, it's always for you to order and me to obey;" and the old gentleman departs to perform his hospitable duty.

"Dick," says Alexis presently, "I should feel happier in my mind if you'd go and see what has become of that poor beast, Bayard."

"I'll go, Alex. But I execrate the brute. If I were to hear that all his four legs were broken I shouldn't care."

"Nonsense, Dick! The beast is only young and silly. We were both too ambitious—wanted to fly too high."

Richard leaves the sufferer unwillingly, and goes in quest of the bay. It is not long before he discovers the horse, a good deal chipped and knocked about, but in no wise seriously damaged, in the stable of the one small inn which adorns Dorley village—a house which you would hardly recognise as one of public entertainment, were it not for a dingy board above the front door—said door having sunk into the yielding soil of Dorley in a despondent and one-sided manner.

Standing in the semi-darkness of a dilapidated stable, principally inhabited by cocks and hens, Bayard wears the dejected and hang-dog aspect of a horse that knows he has committed himself. He gives a deprecatory snort at the sight of Richard, and comports himself altogether in a submissive and even crouching manner.

"Ah," says Dick, looking at him as ferociously as it is possible for the mildest of men to look—"ah, you murderer! I wish there was a law for hanging such as you."

He hurries back to Alexis, and tells him that the brute is all right.

"Not a bone broken. He only broke your bones, the beast."

The Cheswold doctor comes presently, having driven over at a slashing pace to so important a patient. Richard supports his friend during the medical examination, which is slow and painful.

The ribs are much hurt, one bone has been pressed inwards, whence the blood-spitting. It is altogether a serious case.

"I should like you to see Krysis, of Winchester," says Mr. Skalpel, the local surgeon. "I shall not set the arm till to-morrow. There is a little swelling, and there's a slight tendency to inflammation. I'll send a lotion, which must be applied continually. You ought to have a trained nurse, by the way."

"I'd as soon have a ghoul," says Alexis, at which the surgeon fears his mind is beginning to wander. "I detest hired nurses."

"Can't I nurse him?" asks Dick. "I'm strong and wakeful, and I'll obey your instructions to the letter."

"You might be of use undoubtedly, but I think a skilled hospital nurse——"

"Send me to an infirmary at once," cries Alexis, peevishly. "I won't have a hospital hag near me."

"See how the suggestion irritates him," says Dick. "Could not his old housekeeper come over from the Grange?"

"That might do. Yes, she nursed Miss Secretan, I know. I'll call as I go home and tell her to come over."

"Do nothing of the kind," exclaims Alexis. "I'll have no old women pottering about me till they come to lay me out. Mrs. Bodlow's a very good soul in her place—makes an admirable curry, and fries potatoes to perfection; but I won't have her at my bedside in the middle of the night. I'd as soon wake up and see the witches in 'Macbeth.'"

"Nervous temperament, very," murmurs the surgeon.

"Let Dick—my friend here—nurse me, and no one else," says Alexis.

The surgeon gives way. The servant of the house will no doubt be able to assist. All may be well. It would not do to offend such a patient, and this promises to be a long business—a very long business—if it is to result in recovery. There is a possibility of the case being brought to a sad and sudden ending.

Mr. Skalpel takes Dick out on to the stairs.

"It is not a hopeless case?" falters Dick, almost breaking down.

"Hopeless, my dear sir! far from that. But I will not disguise from you that it is very serious. There are grave dangers. The greatest care is needed. Much must depend on the state of the blood. Mr. Secretan is a person of steady habits—or, to put it plainly, not a drinking man, I hope;—not given to the pernicious practice which our modern slang calls 'pegging?'"

"Half a bottle of claret at and after dinner is about the extent of his dissipation."

"That's a good hearing. We shall pull him through, but remember that good nursing is the main point. If you find yourself unequal to the task we must get a trained nurse—foolish prejudice, very—not old hags by any means. Many of them nice-looking young women."

Downstairs Mr. Skalpel sees Linda, and inquires as to the possibility of assistance in the sick room.

"I'm quite ready to give my help, if I can be of any use," says Linda, cheerfully.

"No one better," replies the surgeon; "it was your good nursing that got your grandfather through that bad attack of bronchitis last winter. He'd have been in his grave but for you."

"Dear old grandfather!" says Linda, affectionately.

"But you mustn't over-exert yourself, you know. I don't want two patients instead of one."

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Skalpel. Elizabeth will help me."

Elizabeth is the maid of all work, a buxom girl who seems to be in a perpetual state of expansion, for her gowns are always too small for her, a girl with a brickdust complexion, big black eyes like damsons, a double chin, and a countenance expressive of supreme good nature.

"Humph," says Mr. Skalpel; "I don't know about Elizabeth. Elizabeth has enough to do to take charge of that troublesome adopted son of yours."

Rather a queer look comes over the doctor's face as he speaks of the child—a look of some feeling closely akin to dislike.

"Trot is never troublesome," replies Linda, and again her colour brightens as it did when Richard Plowden questioned her about the boy's relationship to herself.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GOOD SAMARITANS.

For many weary days and nights the patient fluctuates between improvement and retrogression. The business is a long one, as Mr. Skalpel prophesied. Alexis approaches that mysterious border-land which lies between life and death. Mind and memory are dark. He sees shadowy forms at his bedside,—sees the unreal more often than the real, knows not where he is or what he is, and slowly awakening at last, as from one long troubled dream—a dream of almost infinite duration and of wondrous variety—he feels like a child new born to life, seeking dimly to decipher the unknown characters of a strange alphabet.

Who is this with the gentle face, the mild and thoughtful eyes, shadowy hair, and soft white hands, who ministers to him so patiently, whose voice has such a soothing influence?

Is it his wife? A flash of sudden hope quickens the throbbing of his heart; he tries to raise himself up in his bed, when a strong hand restrains him, and a familiar voice says,—

"Alexis, dear old fellow, be careful. Mr. Skalpel says you mustn't exert yourself."

It is no longer winter. The lattices are open, and through the tender green of the willows smiles the blue April sky. Birds are singing—there is a perfume of violets in the room—blessed heralds of spring. Yes, there they are, violets and primroses on the dressing-table—violets and primroses on the little table by his bed. Oh, welcome spring—welcome sense of new-created life in his own frame!

"It was good of you to come to me," he murmurs, with half-closed eyes, "good of you to nurse me. All forgotten, all forgiven. We shall be very happy now, Sibyl."

He thinks his wife is at his side,—a melancholy delusion, which makes Richard Plowden very uncomfortable.

"My dear Alexis," he says soothingly, "it is not Sibyl; we didn't know where to send for her. The lady who has nursed you was a stranger to you until the day of your accident, but if she had been your sister she could not have done more."

Alexis closes his eyes with a heavy sigh.

"She is very good," he murmurs resignedly, "and I have reason to be grateful. I took her for my wife—a foolish mistake. I ought to have known better. But I am afraid my mind has been wandering a little."

He turns restlessly on his pillow, opens his eyes again, and looks wonderingly round.

"Violets!" he exclaims. "How good of you to get me violets at this time of year! What a blue sky for February!"

"February!" cries Richard. "My dear fellow, it is the nineteenth of April."

"April? And I have been lying here——"

"A little over two months."

Alexis feels inexpressibly shocked at this revelation. What! the days and nights have been passing, sunrise and sunset, moons waning, and he has been lying there like a log, or like a madman, full of strange fancies, and unconscious of the flight of time. This loss of two months seems to him in some wise terrible. It is as if he had been lying dead.

"I suppose I have been very ill," he says at last.

"Very ill, dear boy; so near death's door that we have often feared the door would open and you would pass the threshold. Thank Heaven, we were able to keep you fast on this side. You have to thank Miss Challice for your life,—there never was such a nurse."

"You forget that you have done more than half the nursing, Mr. Plowden," remonstrates Linda, who sits with her face somewhat shrouded by the dimity bed-curtain.

"I——. nothing of the kind. I've tried to obey your instructions, but at best I'm a clumsy assistant."

"You are the best of fellows," says Alexis, stretching out his feeble hand to clasp his friend's. "As for Miss Challice," he continues, "I haven't the faintest idea who she is, or how she comes to be interested in me; but I'm intensely grateful."

He falls asleep after this, and slumbers peacefully for some hours. When he awakes it is tea-time, the lattices are closed, and a young moon shines in through the diamond panes. A fire burns cheerfully in the old-fashioned fireplace opposite the foot of the bed. Firelight and moonbeams shine into the room, flashes of silver and gleams of ruddy gold light up the old furniture, the cups and saucers and the old silver tea-pot on the round table by the fire. They shine, too, on a quiet figure by the hearth, the graceful form of a girl dressed in gray, who has fallen asleep in an old bamboo arm-chair by the hearth.

"That's Miss——Whatshername, I suppose," Alexis says to himself. "Curious business, very. Where am I, I wonder? This hardly looks like the Grange."

He tries to raise himself into a sitting position, in order the better to inspect the premises. The process is painful enough to wring a groan from him, and the groan awakens his nurse.

"You mustn't do that," says the gentle voice which has argued and pleaded with him so often in his delirium, but which seems quite unknown to him to-night. "You mustn't try to sit up yet awhile."

"Not yet awhile," repeats Alexis. "I've been ill over two months, and I'm getting better—I believe you will. I am getting better."

"You are much better—you are getting well very fast."

"Oh, this is getting well very fast, is it? And after two months I am not to try to raise myself in my bed. Do you know, it strikes me that's getting well rather slowly."

"You mustn't be impatient. The injury to your ribs brought on inflammation of the lungs. You have been in great danger."

"And you—a stranger—have nursed me?"

"Not a stranger. Providence brought you to our door; you are our neighbour."

"'Which of these, think you?'" murmurs Alexis. "Yes, you have been verily my neighbour, in the Gospel sense of the word. How shall I ever thank you enough, Miss—— "

"Challice," says Linda, as he pauses at a loss for the name. "Believe me, Mr. Secretan, I need no thanks. My grandfather and I are very happy to have been of use to you."

"Dick Plowden says you have saved my life. Where is Dick, by the way?"

"He has gone to lie down for a short time. He has had very little rest of late, poor fellow. And now shall I give you some tea?"

"Yes, if you will be so good. I should like some tea."

She pours out a cup and brings it to him, and raises his head upon the heaped-up pillows which sustain his weary frame, and puts the cup to his lips. It is a curious sensation for him, this awakening to life; curious to look into this strange face in the uncertain firelight, to hear this gentle voice, to feel the soft touch of these white womanly hands.

"If this were but my wife, it would indeed be awakening to new life and new happiness," he thinks, and the thought that another can so minister to him while his wife treads her selfish way, ignorant of his pain, is very bitter.

"I think I could hold the teacup myself," he says, and he makes the attempt feebly, with a tremulous hand.

"Capital!" exclaims Linda. "How strong you are getting!"

"Oh, this is getting strong, is it?" enquires Alexis. "I should like to have seen myself when I was weak. I must have been a pleasing spectacle."

He falls asleep by-and-bye in the firelight, and sleeps long, for he has at this stage of his illness a wonderful capacity for sleep. When he awakes the fire is burning low, and the dim glimmer of a night lamp suggests some sepulchral hour betwixt night and morning. Richard Plowden occupies the easy chair by the fire.

"Where is Miss—Miss—Challice?" asks the invalid.

"In bed, and sound asleep, I hope. She has sat up night after night to watch you, Alex."

"She is very good."

"She is an angel, or as near an approach to the angelic as one can hope to meet with upon earth," replies Richard, with enthusiasm.

"Who is she, Dick? and by what concatenation of events do I find myself in a strange house, watched over by a strange young lady?"

Richard explains.

"Indeed. This is Dorley Mill, and my fair nurse is the miller's granddaughter. If I were a bachelor now, this might be the opening scene of a charming romance. But I should have taken that young lady for something superior to a miller's granddaughter; she has an air of refinement."

"She belongs by inheritance to the world of art. Her father was a painter."

"Challice—yes, I remember, I have seen pictures of his. He died young, I think."

"He did, and left this young lady an orphan."

Mr. Secretan, finding himself able to sit up in bed, and hold a glass or a cup, during the next two or three days shows great anxiety to be taken back to the Grange. He is anxious to resume the business of life—to see his horses, his gardens, to be within reach of his library. He is quite horrified when Mr. Skalpel informs him that he is likely to be obliged to remain at Dorley Mill for three weeks or a month before he will be strong enough to bear the shaking involved in the easiest journey.

"You need not be in a hurry to leave," says the surgeon, "you have been well taken care of, I am sure."

"I should be an ungrateful hound if I were to forget that for a moment," replies Alexis, "but I should really like to relieve this house of my presence; I have given so much trouble."

"That is all past," says Linda. "Our only trouble was the fear that you would not recover."

"Mr. Benfield must consider me an intolerable nuisance."

"He does nothing of the kind," says Dick; "he is looking forward to your going downstairs as if it were some grand holiday."

Alexis sighs. The comforts and indulgences of a sick room pall upon his active temperament. But he resigns himself to the inevitable, and Linda and Richard do their utmost to make his life happy.

Now that bodily strength begins slowly to return he suffers from extreme mental depression. He feels as if this coming back to life were something of a mistake, that it might have been better to have slipped quietly through the dark portal. He feels that he has nothing to live for, neither wife nor child. No kith nor kin, only the beaten round of a prosperous man's existence.

"I who have tasted the bitter cup of poverty ought to find contentment in prosperity," he tells himself; but as the days engthen slowly to their lingering close he is not content.

"He's dreadfully low-spirited," says Dick to his assistant nurse. "What are we to do to cheer him up a little?"

Linda sighs and looks doubtful; but in the course of the afternoon she brings up some of her favourite books, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Dickens, and offers to read to the invalid.

He is delighted. Any relief is welcome that will take him way from his own thoughts. He chooses the "Midsummer Night's Dream," and Linda reads at his bidding.

"We'll have one of the tragedies when I'm stronger," he says. I couldn't stand 'Hamlet' or 'Lear' yet awhile."

From this time forward the reading becomes an institution. Linda is a good reader, her voice round and full, her emphasis lways intelligent. Alexis makes a closer acquaintance with

Tennyson than he has ever made before now, and renews his boyish delight in Dickens.

In about a week after that first reading he is well enough to go downstairs to the cheerful parlour, but not without support from Richard's sustaining arms. There is no longer any talk of his going back to the Grange yet awhile. He knows his own weakness now, and is resigned to the tedium of a slow recovery.

"You are all so good to me," he says, with tears in his eyes, "I should be a fool to wish myself away from you."

It is a sunny afternoon in early May when he goes downstairs for the first time. Linda has done her uttermost to make the room bright and cheerful. There are flowers, sweet spring flowers on the chimney-piece, table, and chiffonier; violets, primroses, hyacinths, narcissus, pale monthly roses from the southern wall. A fire burns gaily in the old-fashioned grate; for the invalid is chilly, and May sunshine uncertain. The invalid's couch has been arranged in the cosiest corner by the fire; snow-white pillows, Berlin wool coverlet, knitted by Linda's own hands as a Christmas present for her grandfather. The brown wainscot walls are brightened with water-colour landscapes in a higher style of art than Alexis would have expected to find at Dorley Mill; but he learns by-and-bye that they are all the work of Linda's pencil.

"What a pretty room!" cries Alexis, when he is established on his sofa, "and what a pretty picture that water-mill makes against the blue sky! I feel ever so much better for the change."

He enjoys the novelty of the apartment as much as if he had come into a new country, and his spirits begin to rise immediately.

"Now I feel that I am really getting well," he says.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Benfield is to come in at five to tea, and there is to be quite a grand tea-drinking in honour of Mr. Secretan's convalescence. The simple-hearted old man is almost as delighted at his guest's recovery as if the Squire of Cheswold were his son.

Linda seats herself in her favourite chair by the open window. Dick places himself by the foot of the couch. The invalid lies in a lazy silence, looking out at the willows and the mill-stream, and the green hills beyond. How lovely nature seems to him after his nights of pain and darkness!

Presently he hears a small voice calling "mammie," and a small hand makes ineffectual attempts to turn the handle of the door. Linda runs to the door, and the prettiest child Alexis ever remembers to have seen runs into the room.

He has soft golden curls all over his small head, rosy cheeks, bold brown eyes, and the open confiding look of a child that has been reared in love's tender keeping. He clings to Linda's dress.

"Mammie, mammie dear," he cries, "Trot wants oo, Trot nenner sees oo now. Oo viz de genlamum?"

"The gentleman has been very ill, darling, and he wanted me more than Trot does."

"Oo tell tory. Trot want oo allvis."

"You had Elizabeth to take care of you, pet. Elizabeth is very kind."

"See isn't. Me hate Lithabess."

"Oh, you naughty boy. Look, Trot, this is the sick gentleman. Go and shake hands."

"Me won't. Me hate the genlamum."

"Oh, Trot!"

"Cause he keeps oo away from Trot."

"But he won't do that any more, Trot," says Alexis, delighted with this infantile grumbler. "Come to me, my little man, and let's make friends. See what I've got here!"

And Alexis produces his watch, that unfailing resource of a man who wants to amuse a child.

At sight of the watch and jingling bunch of lockets and seals the little one's eyes open their widest, and he creeps a little nearer the enemy.

"I don't like oo," he says, "but I'll look at oor watch."

With this protest he goes close up to Alexis, and allows himself to be entertained.

"What a darling little fellow!" says Alexis. "A nephew of yours, I suppose, Miss Challice?"

"No, he is no relation. He is a little boy my grandfather adopted."

"How good of him! The son of an old friend, I conclude."

"No. We adopted him to save him from the workhouse."

"Ah, that is like you—just as you took me in to save me from death."

Alexis does not like to ask any further questions, yet he would be glad to know more about this fascinating little fellow, who soon grows friendly and familiar, and nestles his golden head in the invalid's waistcoat, and plays with the seals and lockets.

Presently the miller comes in to tea, and the table is spread with a simple feast, new-laid eggs, cream, cakes of Linda's manufacture, and strawberry jam, which Elizabeth, the maid of all work, secretly believes to be the best strawberry jam in Hampshire.

Trot sits up in his high chair at the table, and behaves very prettily, though he disposes of more bread and jam, and follows it up with more cake than Alexis can suppose beneficial to his internal economy; but then Mr. Secretan has seen very little of children and their ways.

Henceforward Trot is a wonderful favourite with him. He allows the little fellow to come into his room at all times and seasons, he sends Dick to Winchester for a cargo of picture-books, and Trot sits upon the invalid's bed for hours together looking at the pictures, and demanding explanations thereof. When the pictures have been explained to Trot by Alexis, Trot insists on explaining them over again to the explainer, and lays down the law about them and philosophises upon them in a delightful way.

Never before has Alexis had any dealings with a child. It is a new experience to him. The little fellow amuses him for hours together. The thought that his own son might have grown into just such a boy as this seems a bond of union between him and Trot. The boy grows wondrous fond of him, and places him second only to mammie in his measure of love.

"Have you had Trot long?" Alexis asks one day of Linda.

"Ever since he was a fortnight old."

"What a charge for you! His parents are dead, of course?"

"I know nothing about his parents."

"Indeed! Poor little waif and stray. If you were not so very fond of him I should beg him of you, and make him my son and heir."

"I couldn't bear to part with him. You are not in earnest, of course, but even if you were, and offered him the greatest advantages, I don't think I could bring myself to part with him. I have suffered so much for his sake. Perhaps that is why I love him so dearly."

"Suffered? But how?"

"Pray do not ask me. I cannot possibly tell you. It is all past and gone now, and I try to forget it. But it was very bitter."

This sets Alexis thinking, and the thoughts that come of it trouble him. He sees but one solution of the enigma, and that is one which casts the shadow of disgrace on Linda Challice. Can she, this gentle, lovable girl, with her fair innocent face, be something less pure and perfect than he has believed her? The suspicion pains him as keenly as if she were his sister or his plighted wife. He lies awake for many a weary hour pondering over this painful question. For a little while even his heart turns from poor Trot, who is distressed at finding his new friend less kind, but Trot soon makes himself beloved again. Whatever misery this little brown-eyed boy may have unconsciously occasioned, Alexis cannot help loving him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BITTER ALMONDS.

From January to May is rather a lengthy period for a friendly visit, but although the hawthorns are flowering in Redcastle woods, and May is nearly ended, Joel Pilgrim is still at Lancaster Lodge. He has taken up his abode there as if he meant to stay for the rest of his life, Sibyl thinks. She has grown tired of waiting to hear of his approaching departure. He talks about going sometimes, but never definitely. He must go back to India before very long, he says, and Sibyl languishes for him to fix the date. He goes up to London on business now and then, but returns in a few days, and makes himself more insufferable than ever.

Sibyl has never hated any one as she detests this man. His presence makes life a burden to her. The luxurious tranquillity of her existence, the reposeful days, the pleasures of wealth, are all poisoned by Mr. Pilgrim's company, and yet he treats her with the utmost politeness, with deference even, and obviously admires her to enthusiasm. This admiration is the most painful part of the business.

"If he only hated me as I hate him we might get on very well together," thinks Sibyl; "but as it is, the creature gives me the sensation of living in a glass case with a boa constrictor."

Mr. Pilgrim does not enter Redcastle society, though the *élite* are quite ready to take him by the hand in the fullness of their love for Stephen Trenchard. Mr. Pilgrim is of a reserved temper, and prefers the tranquillity of Lancaster Lodge to the dwellings of strangers. He dines well, and drinks deeply after dinner, but the wine makes no more impression upon him than upon the decanters. Mr. Trenchard and he are often closeted together in business conference, but they never talk business before Sibyl. She has a vague idea that Mr. Pilgrim is a merchant, and that his house of business is in Calcutta, but she has no knowledge of his merchandise.

One day Mr. Trenchard complains to her, and with some bitterness, of her coolness to Joel Pilgrim.

"I think I have been kind enough to you to deserve that you should be civil to any friend of mine, Sibyl," he says; "and yet you are positively rude to Mr. Pilgrim."

"I am not intentionally so, uncle Trenchard," "Then your notion of good manners must be a very curious one. Nonsense, Sibyl! you can be winning enough, fascinating enough, when you please. Yet to this young man——"

"Young!" echoes Sibyl. "He must be five-and-thirty if he's a day."

"No matter, child, he is a young man to me. For him, I say —the son of my oldest friend—you have nothing but cold looks and insulting speeches. It is very hard upon me, Sibyl."

"My dear uncle, I did not know you were so fond of this Mr. Pilgrim. I have fancied sometimes that his visit was rather a trouble to you."

"I have been worried about his affairs now and then. The man himself is very dear to me."

"Then I will try to be more polite to him, my dear uncle, for your sake."

"I want you to try something more than that, Sibyl. You discouraged Sir Wilford Cardonnel's attentions for some inscrutable reason of your own—don't deny it, girl, you must have discouraged him, for I know he was over head and ears in love with you, and now he only makes a formal call once in six weeks. You might have had the first position in this part of the world if you had chosen, but you did not so choose. I saw you fling away your chance, and I did not reproach you. But now I come to something that touches me closer. Joel—the only son of my——" he pauses with a curious smile—"only friend, Joel Pilgrim, a man of strong brain and strong feelings, has fallen in love with you. Not a butterfly passion like Sir Wilford's, mind you, to be blown aside by a breath of yours, but an enduring love. Now I have set my heart on seeing Joel and you man and wife."

"Why should you be so anxious to see me married, uncle Trenchard? You wanted me to marry Sir Wilford, and now you want me to marry this Mr. Pilgrim, with Indian blood in his veins."

"I wanted you to marry Sir Wilford because he could give you a great position. I want you to marry Joel because Joel is dear to me, and to see you two united would be to secure the happiness of the only two people I love."

"Don't be angry with me, uncle Trenchard, but I had as soon you told me a serpent loved me as this Mr. Pilgrim."

She feels that in speaking thus frankly she runs the risk of offending her uncle. For once in her life she is truthful. Her uncle is less angry than she had expected.

"Nonsense, child!" he says carelessly. "You are full of prejudice. You must learn to think better of my friend's son."

"Is he the son of that friend whose death distressed you so much, uncle?" asks Sibyl.

"What death? When?"

"One evening last summer, when you read the announcement in the paper."

Mr. Trenchard looks at her curiously for a moment.

"Yes, yes," he says, "that was the man."

From this time Joel Pilgrim is more open in his attentions. He follows Sibyl like her shadow, rides with her, drives with her, walks in the garden, plays billiards with her, stands beside the piano when she plays or sings, reads the books she reads, associates himself with every hour of her day and every pursuit of her life. She knows not what it is to be alone. She takes the utmost pains, in a quiet way, to let Mr. Pilgrim see that his attentions are odious to her. She never favours him with an encouraging look or word, yet he pursues his course doggedly, like a man who comes from a land where women's opinions and inclinations go for nothing.

People in Redcastle are not slow to talk of Mr. Pilgrim just as they talked of Sir Wilford Cardonnel. It is now evident to the mind of Redcastle that Sir Wilford has cooled and fallen off in his attentions, and that this Anglo-Indian, with his dark face and sleek hair—a real Hindoo, perhaps, some people suggest—is to be Miss Faunthorpe's husband.

"They wouldn't go out riding together if it wasn't a settled thing," says Mrs. Groshen to Mrs. Stormont, "and in *my* day it was not considered correct for a young lady to go out alone with her engaged husband. But young ladies are changed."

"It's money I suppose," remarks Mrs. Stormont, thinking of the main question and not of details. "I have no doubt this Calcutta merchant is immensely rich, and Mr. Trenchard wishes to unite the two fortunes. I thought Sibyl looked very unhappy the last time I called. If she had been allowed to follow her own inclinations things would have taken a different turn. I don't think she ever had such a genuine liking for any one as for my Fred."

"She didn't show it much in her manner," says Mrs. Groshen, smiling amiably.

"She is not a girl to let every one read her feelings," retorts Mrs. Stormont. "What is that some one says in a play about wearing one's heart outside one's dress? She's not that sort of girl. But I know she liked Fred. I sincerely pity her, poor child."

The Stormonts see less of Mr. Trenchard and his niece after Joel Pilgrim's advent. This strange guest of the old man's, who will not go out visiting, even to the best people in Redcastle, seems a stumblingblock to social intercourse. Mr. Trenchard has also taken to refusing invitations, and Sibyl is dull and spiritless, and is even losing her beauty, Mrs. Groshen remarks, with a touch of satisfaction.

"Those brilliant complexions go off so soon," she says. "I'll tell you what it is, my dear, you may depend upon it that things are not quite right at Lancaster Lodge. There's something underhanded going on there."

"But what?" inquires Mrs. Stormont, bursting with curiosity, for the solemnity of her friend's countenance implies a spirit that has penetrated Mr. Trenchard's secrets.

"I don't know what," replies Mrs. Groshen, in the most disappointing way, "but I have an instinct that tells me there is something wrong."

"There is an atmosphere of gloom in the house, I admit. I feel sure that girl is being forced into a distasteful engagement."

So gossips Redcastle, and not altogether without foundation, for the gloom deepens in Stephen Trenchard's house—a gloom which is not to be enlivened by upholsterer's work in the way of gilding and crimson tabouret, or by luxurious dinners served on porcelain and silver, or by fine raiment, or any of the things that Stephen Trenchard's money or credit can buy.

If it were not for one wicked hope, Sibyl would assuredly fly the hateful abode that holds Joel Pilgrim, but that evil hope nerves her to remain.

Mr. Trenchard has been showing signs of rapid decay. The east winds of March and April have withered him. Dr. Mitsand talks less confidently of his patient's fine constitution, and urges extreme care. He expatiates on the perils of our treacherous climate, and suggests that Mr. Trenchard shall spend next winter in the south of France.

Stephen Trenchard has grown nervous and fretful. He complains of sleepless nights, and his failing appetite is obvious to all his household.

Do not these signs betoken the beginning of the end?

"I will stay," Sibyl says to herself, and she fancies there is something almost heroic in the resolution. "However loathsome that man makes himself, I will wait for the end. Perhaps his passion for me is only a pretence, after all—a trap to catch me. If he can prove me disobedient, or force me to run away, he may induce my uncle to alter his will, and leave *him* everything. That may be his plan—a deep-laid plot to ruin me."

Robert Faunthorpe dines with his rich brother-in-law about once in six months, a purely ceremonial visit, which is irksome to both men, though uncle Stephen is very civil, and uncle Robert enjoys the unwonted gratification of an excellent dinner and rare old wine. On the occasion of his last visit, near the end of April, Dr. Faunthorpe sees so marked a change in his brother-in-law that he goes home full of it, and tells Marion that he does not think her uncle is long for this world.

"What a shame!" says Marion, meaning Sibyl's conduct, and not her uncle's decline; "and here have I been estranged from him all the days of his life. It's a hard thing to be plotted out of one's expectations by a designing sister."

"My love, we have no reason to suppose that Mr. Trenchard will act unjustly in the matter of his will," remonstrates the mild little doctor.

"Oh dear no, he has acted so very justly all along; never put Sibyl over my head, never dropped me after taking me up. Oh, of course not!"

To satire so subtle as this Dr. Faunthorpe finds no reply. He only sighs gently, and comforts himself with a pinch of snuff.

Sibyl spends more time at the parish doctor's house just now than she has been used to do. It is the only place where Joel Pilgrim does not accompany her, and on this account it seems to her a haven of refuge. She is more amiable to Marion than of old, more friendly to Hester, more affectionate to Jenny. She feels happier—or at least more at peace—in the shabby old parlour, or the shabbier surgery, than anywhere else.

Jenny, enlightened by Alexis, knows her sister's secret, and is therefore a person to be conciliated. She has sworn eternal fidelity, however, and has never given so much as a hint of the truth to Marion.

It is a comfort to Sibyl in this time of trouble to lay her weary head on Jenny's substantial shoulder and talk hopefully of the days to come, when she and Alexis are to be reunited.

"He threatened never to forgive me," says Sibyl, "but I don't think he will keep his word."

"I am sure he won't if you do your hair the new way," answers Jenny, with conviction. "It makes you look lovely."

On Sibyl's next visit Marion is full of Mr. Trenchard's declining health, and talks about his death as if it were a settled business, appointed to come off within a given time.

"You will be grand, Sibyl! Shall you keep Lancaster Lodge and the carriages? If I were you I should let the house furnished and go on the Continent. Travelling is so delightful, and if you wanted a companion you might take one of your sisters."

"How can you talk so horribly, Marion?" exclaims Sibyl. "Who says uncle Trenchard is going to die?"

"Uncle Robert says he is not going to live long, and I suppose that's pretty much the same thing, only a nicer way of putting it. Uncle Robert ought to know, as a doctor. He generally knows about the parish patients. When he says they're going to get better they don't always do it, but when he says they're going to die they always bear him out. He's very lucky in *that*."

"You are the most dreadful girl, Marion."

"Well, you needn't colour up and look pleased. That's quite as bad as talking horribly. I've a franker disposition than you, and I say things straight out. I suppose he'll leave Jenny and me something for mourning, out of respect to himself. I shall have a corded black silk, thick enough to stand alone. I always looked my best in black."

"Did uncle Robert think that uncle Stephen looked very ill when he dined with us the other day?" asks Sibyl thoughtfully.

"Of course he did, or he wouldn't have said it. We say what we mean at this end of the town. They're more polite above Bar, and the more they say a thing the less they mean it. Mrs. Stormont told me she had taken a tremendous fancy to me when she thought I was uncle Stephen's favourite."

"Don't be so bitter, Marion."

"If you had to have your boots soled and heeled twice over by a clumsy country cobbler you'd be bitter," replies the injured Marion.

Finding this young lady's temper inclining to acidity Sibyl slips away to Jenny's favourite retreat—the surgery, where she finds the damsel seated on the hearth-rug busy at needlework, and performing wonders in the way of stocking-darning.

Sibyl flings herself into Dr. Faunthorpe's easy chair in a despondent attitude, and sits there in moody silence, much to Jenny's discomfiture.

"You might say 'how d'ye do?' to one," she remonstrates.

"I beg your pardon, Jenny. It was mere absence of mind."

"Oh, that's what you call absence of mind above Bar. Hereabouts we call it rudeness."

"Don't be cross Jenny. I'm very unhappy."

"I thought so," replies Jane, astutely, "you've come to see us so much oftener than you used to do, a sure sign that you are miserable. Are you unhappy about *him*?"

"About whom?"

"Oh, you know; my brother-in-law."

"Partly about him and partly for other reasons. I am worried to death."

"But uncle Trenchard will die soon," says Jenny, cheerily, "and then all will come right. We shall go into mourning, and be great swells."

"Jenny, you really mustn't talk so."

"What's the harm?"

"You mustn't talk of poor uncle Stephen's death as if it were an event we were all looking forward to."

"But we are," replies Jenny. "I'm sure Marion does nothing but talk about her mourning, and how she'll have it made. I'm sick of hearing of corded silks and para—— what's its name?—and bugled fringe. I shan't have bugled fringe; it catches in everything, and one can't help scrunching the bugles. It's too great a temptation."

"Uncle Trenchard is weak and ailing, but he may live for years."

"No, he mayn't. Not if uncle Robert knows his business. He says he doesn't think uncle Trenchard will last the summer out. And then we shall come in for anything he has left us. Won't that be jolly! I'd rather he didn't die till the end of the summer. The dusty roads would so spoil our mourning."

"Jane, you are a perfect ghoul."

"Oh, it's all very well for you to be grand and indifferent. You've had the use of his money all along. We are looking forward to coming into a small slice of it. If I'm not made a ward in Chancery and my money all tied up we'll have hot suppers every night."

"Do stop that senseless chatter. Where does uncle Robert keep the laudanum? I've a racking toothache."

"That's why you look so miserable, I suppose. All the poisons are on that top shelf," and Jenny points to the topmost shelf in the darkest corner of the surgery, on which the quick eye of Alexis espied the blue bottle labelled prussic acid.

If Jenny were not so deeply engaged with the complicated dilapidations of her stockings she would clamber upon the doctor's step-ladder and bring down the laudanum, but she goes on with her darning, and leaves Sibyl to get the bottle from its dusty repository.

Sibyl ascends the step-ladder, and descends again with a bottle in her hand, takes an empty phial from a drawer, and pours some of the fluid from the larger bottle into it, dexterously and quickly.

"What a smell of bitter almonds!" cries Jenny. "You've got the wrong bottle! That's prussic acid!"

Quickly as she starts to her feet Sibyl has reascended the ladder, and replaced the blue bottle in its corner before she can reach her.

"It's all right, Jenny. I know laudanum from prussic acid. What a fidgety, officious child you are!"

"I never knew laudanum to smell like bitter almonds," remonstrates Jenny, unconvinced. "Show me the bottle you put in your pocket."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Go on with your work, and don't be ridiculous."

Jenny mounts the ladder, and examines the shelf that holds Dr. Faunthorpe's small collection of poisons. The laudanum and the prussic acid are in bottles of the same colour, but the prussic acid is inverted in a gallipot. Each is in its usual place, but Jane's quick eye perceives that while the laudanum bottle has its coating of dust undisturbed the dust has been rubbed off the prussic acid bottle.

"I hope you are not doing anything dreadful, Sibyl," she remarks solemnly. "Tampering with poison is a dangerous thing."

"I have only taken a few drops of laudanum for my toothache."

"Well, I suppose I ought to believe you, as you're my elder sister. But I can't understand that smell of bitter almonds."

"All your fancy, I assure you, Jenny. And now let's be good friends, and have a nice talk. Don't try to mend those holes. I will buy you some new stockings the next time I go to Carmichael's."

"You're a dear!" exclaims the volatile Jenny, forgetting all about that odour of bitter almonds.

The sisters seat themselves side by side in the window seat, and talk of the future, Sibyl's future, which means reunion with Alexis. They will be rich, happy. Jenny is to live with them, and have a pony to ride.

"And shall we have hot suppers?" inquires Jenny.

"What a vulgar child you are! Of course not. We shall dine at eight."

"That's rather the same thing under another name," says Jenny.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VILLAGE SLANDER.

The days glide by at Dorley Mill. Oh how gently, oh how sweetly, in what innocent rustic delights, in simple, childlike pleasures, shared and sanctified by the perpetual presence of a child! The willows have unfolded their tender young leaves. The white blossoms of the orchards have come and gone like all earth's fairest things, too brief, too transitory. The lazy cattle revel in golden pastures; the pine trees on the hill-tops put forth pale green shoots at the ends of their dark old boughs. It is the time of buttercups and young lambs, trout-fishing, and all delights of early summer, and it has brought along with it fair nights and days, healing and strength, to Alexis Secretan.

Yet, strange to say, now that he is so much better, and nearly well enough to bear the journey to the Grange, he is no longer impatient to return thither.

"My life would be so dull without Trot," he says. "I'm afraid I have fallen in love with Trot."

And then he sighs deeply, and lapses into one of those despondent moods which come upon him sometimes.

Linda bends very low over her work, and she too sighs, but so softly that the sigh reaches no ear but Richard Plowden's, who sits close beside her work-table.

Alexis is well enough to go out of doors and walk a little way, assisted by his cane on one side, and on the other by Linda or Richard. They take it in turns to accompany him in these brief walks; and Linda shows him all the beauties of nature to be seen within a few hundred yards of the mill. They all sit out of doors a good deal in the balmy June weather, and Linda takes her work and books to the rustic bench under the willows, and Alexis has many an afternoon nap, lulled by the bubble of the mill-stream.

But the day comes at last when Mr. Skalpel, who, if he has erred at all, has erred on the side of caution, pronounces that his patient is quite well enough to bear the journey home.

"And I do not say you could not have borne it a fortnight ago," adds the surgeon, "but I knew you to be particularly well off here, and one cannot be too careful."

"Yes, I am very well off here," says Alexis, with a smothered sigh.

"However, since you are well enough to walk the length of the village you are certainly well enough to bear a three mile drive, and we have no excuse for keeping you here any longer."

"No, I have no excuse for remaining," says Alexis, thoughtfully.

"Six weeks ago you were in a great hurry to go home. I could hardly persuade you to be patient."

"Six weeks ago I was ill and fretful. Since then I have domesticated myself here, and now I feel as if Dorley Mill were home. Mr. Benfield and his granddaughter are so good to me; and this little fellow," adds Alexis, laying his hand on the golden head of Trot, who lies at his feet with an open picture-book spread out before him, "this little one and I have grown such friends that I don't know what I shall do without him."

"Ah," says Mr. Skalpel, waxing grave, "poor little boy."

"You speak as if he were no favourite of yours."

"He is not," replies the surgeon. "He has caused too much scandal to be a favourite of mine."

"What do you mean by scandal?"

"Well, Mr. Secretan, country people are censorious. It's a very unworthy feeling on their part, but you'll find that country people *are* censorious, "I have discovered the same failing in London people occasionally," remarks Alexis.

"And if anything happens which is not quite open and on the surface, country people are apt to take a narrow view of it. Now Mr. Benfield's adoption of this boy has given rise to some very unpleasant reports."

"Why should it do so? Is it not an act of charity, a most praiseworthy act?"

"Possibly, possibly, my dear Mr. Secretan. That is the way in which I have always endeavoured to see it, but one can't get other people to look at the thing with the same largeness of view. There is my wife now, an admirable woman; Miss Challice was a great favourite of hers before the appearance of this child; she would have done anything for her; but since this baby came on the scene my wife has quite turned against the poor girl, will hardly allow her name to be mentioned in her presence."

"That seems rather hard."

"It is hard, but it is human nature. There are some sharp angles in human nature. It isn't all Hogarth's line of beauty. You see this child made his appearance in a most mysterious way. If he had dropped from the moon it couldn't have been more sudden, and we know no more about his origin than we do of a moonstone."

"Then people have talked unpleasantly about Miss Challice, I infer."

"They have, Mr. Secretan. There have been hard things said in the village with reference to that child. The village mind is coarse, and the village vocabulary is limited. Spades are called spades."

"And your villagers can hatch a lie out of their foul imaginations," says Alexis, in a tone that quite startles the placable doctor.

"I have always stood up for Miss Challice," he says, "I have always defended her."

"I am sorry there should be any need for defence," replies Alexis, sternly. "I am sorry the people of Dorley and its neighbourhood should be such savages and idiots as not to recognise purity when they see it. I have lived nearly six months under the roof that shelters Miss Challice, and if she is not pure and perfect among women I have no power to recognise womanly purity and goodness."

"I am entirely with you there, Mr. Secretan, yet I cannot help regretting that this child should have ever been brought here to occasion a scandal. There is a secret of some kind about his origin, and wherever there is a secret there is always food for slander. I am sorry because I know Miss Challice has suffered."

"What, the slanders have reached her ears?"

"Yes, on some occasions, and they have made her very unhappy."

"Poor girl! Yet when I offered to adopt Trot, she would not hear of such a thing."

"I dare say not. The little fellow has wound himself about her heart, no doubt. They were always a soft-hearted race, these Benfields. The old man has been an encourager of tramps and beggars, too easy by half. It doesn't do, Mr. Secretan."

"Benevolence? No, it seems a failure in this life."

This conversation with the surgeon makes a strong impression upon Alexis. Instead of going downstairs to the sitting-room where Richard and Linda are expecting him, he remains in his own room all the afternoon, keeping the child for his companion. The little fellow will amuse himself for an hour together, playing about the room in his quiet little way, and perfectly happy.

Alexis looks at him with infinite compassion.

"Poor little waif, what is to be your fate in the years to come?" he asks himself. "You cannot always have the calm shelter of Dorley Mill. The day will come when you will have to go out into the world to fight the battle of life—nameless, perhaps friendless, unless I am living to befriend you. Poor child, I would give much to know your history, and yet there are questions I dare not ask. There is always the horrible doubt, the lurking fear that this village scandal may contain some grain of truth."

He is disinclined for Linda's society that evening, and goes out at sunset for a solitary stroll, with no support but his cane. It is the first time he has walked without the help of Linda or Richard.

He goes down to the willow-shaded path, contemplates the simple pastoral landscape in a thoughtful mood, scarcely seeing the objects he gazes at, and then strolls past that brief row of old-fashioned cottages which constitutes the village of Dorley.

Some men are standing before the little public-house, and one of them seems considerably amused in a quiet way at the appearance of Alexis, pale and wan still, and leaning heavily on his cane.

"He don't look up to much yet, do he?" says one of those village worthies when Alexis has passed, but before he is out of hearing.

"No," says the man who grinned. "He looks a rare sight. Yon's the rich gentleman at the mill. Miss Challice's new lovyer."

"Who says he's her sweetheart?" asks the other.

"Well, folks don't say it, may be, but they knows it pretty well, I should think."

"That's the young woman that's got the 'dopted child," says the facetious man's friend.

The humorist is a drunkard and ne'er-do-well, who has been refused employment at the mill, and is bitter against Mr. Benfield and his household.

"'Dopted child!" he says, with his coarse laugh, raising his voice on purpose that Alexis may hear him. "There's many sech 'dopted children in these parts, but we calls 'em by another name. We calls 'em——"

He has just time to utter a blasphemous adjective, but not the substantive that is to follow it, for the adjective is thrust back between his teeth, as it were, by a blow which strikes him on the mouth and seems to loosen every tooth in his head. It is astonishing how hard a weak man can hit when his arm is impelled by such passion as moves Alexis to-night. He staggers from the recoil of his own blow, and might fall were it not for a bystander's friendly arm stretched out to support him.

"Sarve him right," says one of the sufferer's companions, as he stands before them, a piteous object, pouring his blood upon the dusty road, as in a libation to the great mother. "He didn't ought to have gone and said anything agen Miss Challice. She be a good friend to the poor folks."

The injured man growls out some threat about "summonsing" and "the beak."

"Summon me before whom you please," replies Alexis. "I shall think this evening's work cheap at five pounds."

Alexis goes back to the mill curiously moved by what has happened.

"Why do I feel insult to her so keenly?" he asks himself. "Is it that she is more to me than I dare avow even to my own heart? Is there peril for my future peace in this quiet home that has sheltered my sickness and pain? Your fault, Sibyl, your fault. You have left your place to be occupied by another. Whatever evil befalls me is your work. Let it be my care that I bring no evil upon the good Samaritans who have succoured me in my weakness. Mr. Skalpel is right, I have no excuse for remaining at Dorley another day. But before I go I would give much to learn the secret of that child's adoption."

He is not a little enfeebled by his act of violence and the passion that accompanied it. His heart beats violently, and he is barely strong enough to get back to the mill, where he arrives in a state of extreme exhaustion, and so pale as to frighten Linda and Richard almost as much as if his ghost had returned instead of himself.

"How ill you are looking, Mr. Secretan!" says Linda anxiously, when she has arranged the pillows on his sofa and brought him a tumbler of claret and water. "You have been walking too fast, and alone."

"I am sorry I look so ill," replies Alexis, "for Mr. Skalpel tells me I am quite well, and I am to go home to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes; there is no excuse for my being a burden to you any longer."

"You have never been a burden," answers Linda, in a very low voice. Her face is hidden from Alexis, but not from Richard Plowden, who in their daily companionship has learned the meaning of that thoughtful countenance all too well. He reads her secret there to-night, and the knowledge pierces him to the heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TROT'S HISTORY.

Alexis wakes next morning with a throbbing head and a vague sense of trouble and regret; but upon the one question of his immediate return to the Grange his mind is fixed. There shall be no further delay. He has been long enough at Dorley—perhaps too long for his peace.

"If any one had told me last Christmas that my heart could ever beat one throb in the minute faster for any woman living except my wife, I should have given him the lie boldly enough. Is it gratitude—respect—affection—that makes me think so much of my fair young nurse, and think it so hard a thing to part from her? Or is it a feeling that I am bound to stifle? I hardly know how to answer that question even to myself. At worst the sentiment is a mild one. Passion has no part in my love—if love it be. It is pure and reverent, and I will say no word that shall sully it. Yet I can but feel what new brightness might glorify my life if I were free to love this girl."

He rises later than usual, and not before Trot has come to knock at his door and announce the hour.

"Bekkust is weady for oo," says Trot; "oo eggs is boiled. Trot found 'em in the henhouse; Cothin Thina ones."

"Dear little Trot! How I shall miss that baby voice, and those pretty baby ways!" thinks Alexis. "Coming presently, Trot," he cries cheerily, and Trot makes his way downstairs rather noisily, as he alights upon every stair with a jump.

It is noon when Alexis goes down to breakfast, a radiant summer noon, and the first strawberries from the garden are upon the table, nestling among their aristocratic leaves. Linda is seated in her accustomed place by the window, her inexhaustible work-basket by her side. When she is not working for her grandfather or Trot she is making clothes for the poorest among her neighbours.

"You accused me of looking ill last night, Miss Challice," says Alexis as they shake hands; "and this morning I find you as pale as your lilies out yonder. What has happened to disturb you?"

"I have been told what you did yesterday evening," answers Linda, gravely.

"What, my little escapade with one of your amiable neighbours," cries Alexis, lightly. "You don't mean to say people have been talking of such a trifle as that? I think I taught the gentleman that it's bad manners to laugh at a sick man."

"Was it for laughing at you that you struck him, Mr. Secretan?" asks Linda.

"Certainly. My cadaverous looks provoked his mirth, and if I do resemble the Knight of the Rueful Countenance, I don't choose to be laughed at before my face."

"Oh, Mr. Secretan, I know all that was said by that man. Elizabeth has been in the village this morning, and people have told her all that happened. It was the slander against me which you resented. The old cruel slander which has pursued me ever since I took pity upon that desolate child."

The tears roll slowly down her cheeks, but she wipes them hastily away and regains composure. She is not one of those women who wash out their grief in tears.

"No one shall slander you in my presence, Miss Challice, and go unpunished. I'm sorry I let that foul-mouthed ruffian off so easily."

"And you do not believe——you——" Her voice fails her, and again the unbidden tears start to her eyes.

"I believe anything against you? No, Linda. But if you would trust me with your secret——"

"I have no secret," replies Linda, with a frank, steady look, more convincing than a world of protestation. "I have shrunk from talking to you of that dear little fellow's history only because it is a very sad one, and because the scandal which he has brought upon us has made the subject particularly painful to me. I should have been weak and cowardly if I had consented to part with my little darling just because people are wicked enough to speak evil of me, but I am not so brave as to endure their slander without pain. I have suffered deeply."

"Tell me all, I entreat you. I think I love that child almost as well as you do. He is about the age my own son would have been had he lived—the son I never saw. That sounds curious, does it not? but the history of my marriage is a very painful one, Miss Challice, though I thank God it has no element of disgrace—and I——" here he falters a little, as if the words he has to speak were somewhat difficult to say—"I still have the hope of reunion with my wife."

He may have some motive for speaking of Sibyl to-day, though she has been very little in his thoughts of late.

"Tell me all about Trot's birth."

"Let me see you begin your breakfast first. It's rather a long story."

"I am all attention."

"It was about the end of March, three years ago, when I first saw Trot. It was a bleak afternoon, windy and cold. I had gone out into the front garden to look for the first wall-flowers, when I saw a woman leaning against the railings for support. I did not see at first that she had a baby in her arms, it was so hidden by an old sealskin jacket. I asked her if she was ill, and she said yes, she was ill and tired. She had walked all the way from Winchester. I asked her to come in the porch and rest. She came in, and had hardly seated herself when she fainted, and would have fallen if I had not managed to support her in my arms. Then the baby began to cry, and I saw him for the first time—such a tiny thing. Fortunately I was accustomed to young babies, from having visited a good deal among our cottagers."

"And you took them in, mother and child, and sheltered and nourished them?"

"What else could I do? Elizabeth and I soon discovered that the poor creature was starving. She had been living on penny rolls for the last fortnight—ever since she had left the workhouse, where her baby was born. Yes, that sounds dreadful, doesn't it? Our darling Trot was born in Winchester Union."

"Dreadful indeed from society's point of view. What kind of person was the mother?"

"I can hardly tell you. She was very ill when we took her in—worn and wasted to a mere shadow. She must have been very pretty when she was happy and well, but her beauty was all gone. She was very reserved, and though I tried to win her confidence, she would tell me nothing about herself—what she had been in the past, or what she hoped to be in the future. She seemed very unhappy, and though she was evidently fond of her baby, he seemed rather to add to her unhappiness. I felt that her story must be a very sorrowful one."

"And you pitied her?"

"With all my heart. One day when she had been with us about a week, and was beginning to get a little better and stronger, I asked her if she had any home to go to. She had been talking about leaving us in a day or two. Yes, she said, she had a home, and she was going to it, but she did not know what to do with her baby. There were reasons why she could not take the baby home. And then she asked me if I knew any honest woman in the village who would take care of the child for a year or two, and trust to her sending payment for its maintenance regularly after her return home. I told her that I was afraid none of our own villagers would take the responsibility of a stranger's child. They would want to know who and what she was before they trusted her. Of course I said this as kindly as I could."

"As if you could be anything but kind!" exclaims Alexis.

"After this I could see she was very much disturbed in her mind. She sat with the baby in her lap, crying over it in a fretful way, and she was evidently in great trouble, and chiefly about the baby. I don't know how it was, but just then there came into my mind the thought of all I had ever heard about wretched women killing their children. I thought of this poor creature wandering about the country penniless, friendless, with a wailing infant in her arms, and how in some dreadful hour wandering by the side of a river, the temptation might come to her to drown this sweet, innocent little thing, which, even in its unconsciousness, seemed to cling to me, and to be happier in my arms than in its mother's.

"Doubtless infants, like the lower animals, have an instinct that tells them when they are beloved," remarks Alexis.

"'If my grandfather would only let me keep your child!' I said, at which she burst into tears again, and threw her arms round my neck, and entreated me to take care of the little one, and promised me all kinds of rewards by-and-bye, when fortune smiled upon her. I told her I wanted no reward except the delight of making the little fellow happy, and teaching him to love me. I thought very little of the responsibility I was assuming, I am afraid. It seemed scarcely more to me than if I was offering to take care of another kitten to add to our family of pets."

"What did your grandfather say to the idea?"

"Bless his kind heart, he never refused me anything in his life. He was rather against the notion at first, and he asked me if I had considered what a burden we should be taking upon ourselves, and what we were to do with the baby when it grew up. 'A baby's easy to keep;' he said; 'a quart of new milk more or less won't hurt us, but what shall we do when he's a big fellow and wants schooling?' 'He can go to the mill and work for his living,' I said. 'Not if you bring him up as a pet and plaything,' said grandfather, 'he'll be too good for the mill.'"

"And you had your way?"

"Yes; I couldn't get that idea about the river out of my mind, ind I was determined the unhappy mother shouldn't take the aby away, so I talked my dear old grandfather into giving his onsent, and he promised to adopt the child. The poor creature vent down on her knees to me when I told her that I would take are of her baby, but she was not any more inclined to confide n me than she had been at the very first; and two days aftervards she insisted upon leaving us, though I begged her to stay ill she was stronger and better able to travel. She was resolute, so I gave her a couple of sovereigns, all the money I had of my wn, and patched up her clothes a little. She was dreadfully shabby, poor thing, and at daybreak one morning she left us to valk to Winchester, where she was to take the parliamentary rain to London."

"You are sure she was going to London?"

"That is what she told me, and she was anxious to get to Winchester in time for the London train."

"She did not even tell you her name?"

"No. 'I might give you a false name,' she said, 'but what vould be the use of that? If I live, and things prosper with me, ou shall know all about me some day.'"

"That was vague," says Alexis. "Did she wear a wedding ing?"

"Yes, but she told me that it was one she had bought for a enny. 'I sold the real one to buy bread,' she said."

"And she left her child without showing any grief?"

"No, just at the last she broke down, clasped him to her reast, and cried over him bitterly."

"Have you heard nothing of her since that time?"

"I have had no actual communication. But I have received hree ten-pound notes at intervals each in a blank envelope, osted in London. I have put the money into the savings bank or my darling."

"And the envelopes, you kept them, I suppose?"

"No, they were directed in a cramped unformed hand, like hat of a very common person. I cannot think that it was the vriting of Trot's mother, yet I feel sure the money must have ome from her."

"There was nothing written inside the envelope?"

"Not a word. The bank note was wrapped in a blank sheet f paper."

"Provoking!" exclaims Alexis. "I would give a great deal o know more about Trot's origin. His name of Trot, by the vay, how did he come by that?"

"It is only a pet name which my grandfather gave him when e first began to walk and was always trotting about the house.

He was christened William after my grandfather, who stood for him. We had him christened the week after his mother left us."

"Poor little Trot, but for you he might have been left outside the fold. Poor little Trot, born in a workhouse, abandoned by his mother, fatherless, nameless! Well, Miss Challice, his schooling shall never trouble you or your grandfather. We'll send him to Winchester when he's old enough, and to Oxford after, and make a man of him. That shall be my duty, and it may be some small return for all the care you and your worthy grandfather have bestowed upon me."

"You are too good. Believe me, we need no recompence."

"No more did the good Samaritan. How long is it, by the way, since you received the last bank note?"

"Not more than two months ago. It came while you were very ill."

"I thank you most sincerely for having told me this story. I am deeply interested in Trot, deeply moved by your goodness to him. It is a hard thing that such an act of divine charity should have brought sorrow upon you. It makes me detest your innocent rustics."

"Do not blame them. It arises out of their ignorance——"

"No," cries Alexis sternly, "it arises out of their knowledge of evil, and incapacity to believe in good."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GAINING TIME.

Not long does Mr. Pilgrim content himself with undeclared and silent homage. The day comes, too soon for Sibyl, when he opens the floodgates of his passion. He is a very different wooer from the honest-minded English gentleman, Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and Sibyl finds her position more painful than it has ever been yet.

He follows her into the garden one June evening after dinner, when twilight is creeping over Redcastle, purpling the foliage in Sir John Boldero's park, and spreading a faint gray shadow over the brilliant flower-beds on Mr. Trenchard's lawn.

"Why always avoid me?" asks Joel tenderly, as Sibyl quickens her pace at his coming.

"I think the reason is obvious," she says.

She has constrained herself to be civil to him since that remonstrance of her uncle's, but to-night the tenderness of his tone, its ily smoothness, its hypocritical sweetness, irritates her beyond ll bearing.

"You mean that my presence is disagreeable to you."

"You may construe my remark in that way if you please. I 1ay respect you as my uncle's friend, but you really give me a ttle too much of your society for me to value you on your own ccount."

"But it is on my own account that I seek to be valued, Sibyl. fig for the respect you pay your uncle's friends! Give me love or love, truth for truth."

"Love!" she echoes scornfully.

"Yes, love; am I so revolting a person that the word sounds bnoxious from my lips? Yes, Sibyl, love. You know that I ove you devotedly, passionately, with the kind of love that can onquer obstacles and win its wish in spite of all opposing inluences. There is nothing to oppose me but your own obdurate eart. Your uncle's most ardent desire is that you should be my ife."

"You have worried him into expressing such a desire," replies ibyl; "but I do not believe that it is really his wish. His ardent esire before you came here was that I should marry Sir Wilford ardonnel."

"Sir Wilford Cardonnel has no claim upon your uncle's affecion—can never be to him what I am."

"Whatever you may be to my uncle, I only know that the ffect of your presence has been to alter him strangely for the orse. There has been no happiness in this house since you have ved in it."

Happily for Sibyl, she does not see the vindictive look—a look f wrath that is almost deadly—which Joel Pilgrim turns upon er after this speech. Her eyes are fixed on the shadowy line of oodland which shuts out the world beyond Sir John Boldero's ark.

Joel takes time before replying to these uncomplimentary emarks, and his voice when he does reply has all its familiar landness,—that oily smoothness which is so hateful to Sibyl.

"Why do you say these hard things to me, Sibyl?" he asks. Is it to prove my love—to test my forbearance, and gauge the epth of my devotion by my power to endure your insults?"

"I have no wish to insult you," replies Sibyl, feeling that she as gone a little too far, and that this scene may be used to her isadvantage with her uncle. "We might be good friends if you ould only leave me alone. I do not interfere with you. I am ot jealous of your influence with my uncle. Why do you follow ie about and persecute me with attentions which, as I have andidly told you, are disagreeable to me?"

"Why does the sunflower turn to the sun? I follow you because I love you, and because I have sworn to win love for love."

"That you will never do."

"Yes, Sibyl, love will come by-and-bye with time and custom, when you are my wife."

"That day will never dawn."

"Yes, it will, Sibyl. You have played your cards too well to throw up the game just at the last, when you are close upon winning. Come, we will abandon poetical similes and lovers' talk, and settle the subject like a man and woman of the world. With all your sweetness there is a touch of worldly wisdom about you, Sibyl. We will speak plainly. You have set your heart upon inheriting your uncle's fortune, a prize worth winning, I grant—a diamond not to be found in every mine. You have wound yourself about the old man's heart, and have made yourself dear to him. You stand a good chance of being heiress to that incalculable wealth. But I come upon the scene, an adventurer, you think, perhaps, and one who seeks to deprive you of that vast inheritance. You are wrong, Sibyl. I have never schemed to inherit Stephen Trenchard's fortune; but he and I have certain business relations, and he is necessary to me. He is fond of me too, after his own fashion—just as he is fond of you—and he has made up his mind that we two shall be one. If you thwart that desire you hazard his favour, nay, I will go so far as to say that I know your refusal to gratify this wish would lead him to alter his will."

"And you know that he has made a will in my favour?" cries Sibyl, betrayed into a question which, after a moment's reflection, she feels ashamed at having asked, of this man most of all.

"Yes," replies Mr. Pilgrim, deliberately. "I know that Stephen Trenchard has bequeathed the bulk of his fortune to you; nay, I may go so far as to say his entire fortune. Your sisters will be disappointed, I fear, but you have made yourself the favourite, you see."

"And he is soon to die," reflects Sibyl. "If I offend him now by absolutely refusing to marry this man, I shall lose all. If I can gain time—a very little time, perhaps—all will be mine."

"Give me your answer, Sibyl," pleads Joel. "I am ready to forgive all the cruel things you have said. A woman's hard words signify but little. Tell me that you will be my own sweet wife, that I may go back to India by-and bye, with a fair princess from the west—fairer than a dream to Indian eyes. Give me hope, Sibyl."

"Give me time," replies Sibyl. "I have told you that—that I do not understand you—that the idea of your affection is at present most painful to me. Give me time to overcome what is perhaps an unworthy prejudice on my part. I would make any ossible sacrifice to please my uncle, who has been very good to me. With time, perhaps——"

"So be it," says Joel, offering her his hand, that small, cold and, whose touch she so much dislikes. "Shake hands upon that, my princess. I will wait. You have no idea how patient I an be if I see my way clear to the end. Let Fortune say to me uch or such a prize is there for you to win, and I will win it. I ill win you, my love, if conquest lies within the limits of the ossible."

"And you will not torment me with attentions which——"

"Which only increase your prejudice against me. No, Sibyl, will sink the lover and be only the man of the world. I will say o myself, 'My love knows that it is her interest to overcome er distaste for me, that to refuse my hand is to throw away ortune. I have only to be patient. All good things come to him who can wait, like yonder moon which pierces that summer cloud, nd shines upon some belated traveller, just when the way seemed arkest.' Come, Sibyl, let us go back to our dear uncle—my ncle as well as yours, by-and-bye. The dew is falling, and your English compounds—or gardens, as you call them—are so damp."

They go back to the drawing-room, where Stephen Trenchard its reading by a brilliant carcel lamp, and the look which Sibyl urns upon him is perhaps the most awful look that has ever crutinized his face, for it is the gaze of one who watches for the okens of death. Is that true which they all say? she wonders lespairingly. Is the forecast shadow of the end dark upon his ace already? Does that grayish tinge which overspreads the allower tint beneath, mean only the slow advance of age? or is t the awful hue of swift approaching death? She cannot tell. He is so fitful in his health and spirits, feeble to helplessness to-day, full of restless activity to-morrow.

He looks up from his newspaper as they enter from the garden.

"Well, young people, have you been enjoying the moonlight?"

"Yes, we have had a pleasant stroll, the pleasantest I have had since I came to England. I never saw a moonrise that shone upon such content as I feel to-night," answers Joel.

Sibyl tries not to shudder too obviously.

"Shall I read to you, uncle?" she asks, feeling that even the money article will be better than love-like speeches from the lips of Joel Pilgrim.

"No, my dear, I have finished my *Times*. You and Joel can play chess."

It is a game of skill in which Joel excels and which Sibyl utterly detests. He has taught her to play just tolerably, and she would rather play chess with him—the game engaging all his faculties and exercising all his cunning—than hear him talk;

so she takes her place at the board submissively, and Joel's tawny hands arrange the stately carven images, castles on elephants, Indian potentates for kings, Indian warriors for pawns, and Brahmins for bishops.

For a little while after this interview in the garden Sibyl's life is more endurable, for Mr. Pilgrim's attentions are less marked. He does not follow her from room to room so persistently as he did before his declaration. He allows her to ride alone, horsemanship being an exercise which he cordially dislikes. She has leisure in which to brood upon the difficulties that hem her in, and calculate upon the hour which will bring her release.

But this period of repose does not last long. One morning her uncle sends Podmore to summon her to his study. She finds him seated at his table, which is littered with papers and letters, and before him lies that oblong volume which she saw on the night after the races through the glass door, and which she supposes to be a ledger.

Joel Pilgrim stands by the window, very serious of aspect, his tawny countenance a shade paler than usual.

"I have sent for you to discuss a very important subject, Sibyl," begins Mr. Trenchard—"one that is vital to you and Joel."

"Yes, uncle Stephen," she answers falteringly, feeling as if she were expected to reply in some wise.

"Sit down, my dear. We may have much to say to each other;" and Sibyl sinks into the nearest chair, dreading to hear the rest. "The last mail has brought Joel some unpleasant—I should rather say some unexpected—news about his business in Calcutta. He will have to return to India almost immediately."

Joel gnaws his nether lip and turns his face away from the speaker, perhaps to hide that vindictive look in eye and lip. Sibyl's heart beats furiously, but her agitation is full of joy. Heaven has sent her a reprieve. Her tormentor is obliged to depart. There will be an end of that hateful question about marriage."

"Yes, my dear, our poor Joel has to return to Calcutta by the next steamer, or the first steamer that he can be ready for. and he does not want to go back alone. You understand, Sibyl."

Very ghastly is the change in Sibyl's face as she looks at her uncle, struck speechless by this sudden revulsion from gladness to despair.

"You understand, my dear?" repeats Stephen Trenchard.

"No, indeed, uncle."

"You have promised to be Joel's wife——"

"No, uncle, I gave no promise," she falters, with white lips. "I only said that I would try to like him better—that——"

"Bah! that's a girl's vague way of putting it. You women lways beat about the bush. Joel looks upon it as a promise, nd so do I. It is a settled thing. You and Joel are to be man nd wife, thus fulfilling the dearest wish of my heart, as Joel's ldest friend and your nearest kinsman. By this means you will mutually enjoy all I have to bequeath. In a word, I have set ny heart upon this marriage, Sibyl, and it cannot take place too oon. Joel's recall to India is a reason why it should take place nmediately. Joel will lose no time in obtaining the licence. et me see—this is Tuesday. When does the next Peninsular nd Oriental leave Southampton, Joel?"

"On Monday."

"Good; you can be married on Saturday. You can go to York or the licence this afternoon, Joel."

"But, uncle Stephen, so soon—in a few days—it is impossible."

"Nonsense, child! nothing is impossible to men of business, ke Joel and me. We have managed more difficult things than his in our time, haven't we, Joel?"

A sardonic laugh is Joel's only answer. Persistent as he has een in his wooing, his air this morning is not exactly suggestive f delight, or of that entrancement which should belong to iumphant love.

"But you are so ill, uncle—I could not leave you."

"I am flattered by the affectionate thought, but I am not so ill s you suppose. And the idea that I have made you and Joel appy will be better than medicine."

"My trousseau, uncle—my outfit? To go to India at a few ays' notice! I assure you that any one would tell you it is npossible."

"Any one might tell me any absurdity, but I should not be bliged to believe them. Do not let us have any more young dy-like objections, Sibyl. The matter is settled. Joel will go York by the two o'clock train, and I will write to Mr. Chasubel give notice of the wedding on Saturday. As to trousseau, as u call it, you must have finery enough to last your lifetime, I hould think, judging from the length of your bill at Carmichael's; d now go, my dear; Joel and I have business matters to discuss r the next half-hour. Joel, salute your bride."

Mr. Pilgrim intercepts Sibyl at the door, and takes her hand. e draws her towards him, as if about to kiss her on the lips; it there is something in her look so repellant, nay, so abhorrent, at even his audacity is checked. He falls back a little, and ises her hand to his lips, and with this ceremonious salutation ts her go.

"You are not a very warm lover, Joel," says Stephen Trenard, with a sneer, when the door has closed upon his niece. "The n of the tropics doesn't seem to have infused much of its fire to your veins."

"You see me at a disadvantage"' replies the other, seating himself at the table, and examining one of those numerous documents with a moody attentiveness that suggests trouble. "The girl hates me."

"And you hate the girl. Is that it?"

"No. I think her one of the loveliest women I ever saw; a prize worth winning at some cost of self-abasement. But her detestation for me is a little too obvious, and I must confess that I am somewhat less eager to win her than I was a few weeks ago."

"Before I made certain confidences, eh, Joel? Never mind. I told you I would make her marry you, and you see I mean to keep my word. Loving or loathing will make very little difference to you, I take it. You will know how to make her obey you. You will have a pretty wife to uphold your position in Calcutta—a good card to play always where fools abound, as they do in the City of Palaces. And you will have the handling of my fortune."

"I ought to be grateful," replies Joel, coldly, with his eyes still bent upon a column of figures.

"And now, Joel, let us be business-like. I think you will confess that I have gone into your affairs thoroughly this morning. There has been no impatience. I have not been betrayed into one angry word, but I have arrived at a conclusion, and I shall abide by it."

"And that is——"

"I must have ten thousand pounds from you between this and Saturday at nine in the morning. Just two hours before your wedding. Or else——"

"Or else what?"

"The house of Pilgrim and Company will go down like a vessel that breaks her back—straight to the bottom, Joel."

"It is quite impossible."

"Not to a man of business, Joel. To great generals and clear-headed commercial men there is nothing impossible. We only print the word in our dictionaries for the weak and brainless portion of humanity."

"It is not to be done."

"It is to be done, and it must be done," retorts Stephen Trenchard, bringing down his clenched fist upon the open ledger—"ten thousand pounds in hard cash, Joel—a drop out of the ocean, a brand from the burning. Borrow it, raise it how or where you can, among your English connections, but understand I must have it on Saturday morning, or before Saturday afternoon I shall have telegraphed to my solicitors in Calcutta, and the house of Pilgrim will be doomed."

"After all the money I have earned for you in the past?"

"That past is long gone by, Joel—it is the pluperfect. You have been sucking my blood like a vampire for the last three years, and have left me all but bloodless. I must have that ten thousand pounds."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT BAY.

It is evening. Stephen Trenchard has retired to his room immediately after dinner, looking wan and wearied, worn out perhaps by that interview with Joel Pilgrim in the study. Sibyl has offered to go to his room and read to him, and has had her offer refused.

"I am tired, my dear, and want sleep if I can get it; but that seems harder for me to obtain now than for a pauper to get gold. One would think the voice of doom had cried out to me, as it cried to Macbeth, 'Sleep no more!'"

"Macbeth was a murderer, uncle. You should not compare yourself to him."

"No; I have never dipped my hands in blood. I have used the world pretty much as it has used me, I believe—give and take."

Sibyl is alone in a small sitting-room adjoining her bedroom; a pretty little room which Mr. Trenchard has allowed her to appropriate to herself, and which she has adorned with various elegant trifles from the Redcastle shops—books, engravings, statuettes—the things that women love.

Here she sits to-night, a prey to something very near despair. She is now completely hemmed in. Only two modes of escape lie before her. The first and more obvious is flight. She can leave Lancaster Lodge. There is no constraint upon her. She is free to go away, penniless as when she came, leaving fortune behind her. The second and more hazardous alternative is to prevail upon Joel Pilgrim to abandon his design; to induce him, of his own accord, to give up the idea of marriage until he is able to return from Calcutta.

Ten o'clock strikes, and soon afterwards she hears the bell at the lodge entrance, and then wheels grinding over the gravel, and she knows that Mr. Pilgrim has returned with the licence. She has breathed more freely during his absence, and his return seems to bring an atmosphere of trouble and perplexity into the house. Will he come to her, or send for her to tell her that his hateful errand has been successfully accomplished? She sits listening for his detested footstep. The ears of hate are as keen as those of love, and she knows that footfall only too well.

Yes, there it comes along the carpeted corridor, slow and stealthy. "The jungle tigers walk like that, I dare say," thinks Sibyl.

Joel opens the door softly and comes in. The dull yellow of his complexion is relieved by a crimson flush on the smooth cheeks. His black eyes glitter with an unaccustomed light. Mr. Pilgrim has dined more generously than usual at York, and has refreshed himself with soda and brandy more than once during the homeward journey. He is altogether a different man from that Joel Pilgrim who recoiled from Sibyl this morning, abashed by her coldness.

"I saw the light in your window, my pretty one," he says, seating himself at the table where Sibyl is reading, and drawing his chair close to hers, "and I knew where to find you."

"Hadn't you better go downstairs and order some supper, Mr. Pilgrim? It is nearly eleven o'clock, and the house will be going to bed almost immediately."

"Let the house go to Gehenna," exclaims Joel; 'I want nothing it can give me. I only want to see your lovely eyes, Sibyl, to hear your sweet voice, and to claim the kiss you denied me this morning. Look here," taking a paper from his breast pocket, "the Archbishop of York has given me permission to make you my wife; the knot is to be tied next Saturday; in four days, Sibyl—only four days, you who have been so cruel, you who have held me aloof so long, will be all my own. Yes, Sibyl; you who have pretended to hate me——"

"Pretended!" cries Sibyl, with an angry flash from her dark eyes. "My hatred has been very real."

"I am glad of that. They say extremes meet. It will be an easy transition from hatred to love; both are fiery passions. It is your lukewarm indifference that can never be kindled into affection."

"Now is the time," thinks Sibyl, "if I am to make an appeal to his forbearance, his pity, his self-interest. I can but try him."

"Mr. Pilgrim," she begins falteringly.

"What a formal mode of addressing your affianced lover—the man who has his marriage licence in his pocket!"

"I can call you by no other name," she answers. "I am going to be more candid to-night than I have ever been. You may betray my confidence, perhaps ruin me with my uncle; I cannot help it. Between you, you have driven me to bay."

"Very cruel of us," murmurs Joel, leaning back in his chair looking at her with an admiring smile. She is very lovely in her agitation; cheeks faintly flushed, eyes brilliant, parted lips of carnation. Her suffering moves him not a jot.

"You have seen how I have striven to avoid you. You have put my avoidance down to hatred, and this perhaps has galled your pride—you have felt a natural anger against me, and you have resolved to win me in order to revenge yourself upon my insolence."

"A very subtle way of putting the case. No, Sibyl; I resolved to win you because you are lovely, and I love you. I need no stronger reasons than those two."

"You could not be determined to make me miserable unless I had provoked your anger. Forgive me for my seeming hatred to you; it was not really hatred of you, but love for another. My heart has long been given to another. I have pledged myself to be faithful to him to the end of my life, no matter what obstacles might intervene to keep us asunder. There are reasons why I can never tell my uncle of this engagement, reasons why I must keep it faithfully in spite of the world."

"No reason can stand against the archbishop's licence, and the fact that you and I are to be married on Saturday," replies Joel, with the same insolent smile—the smile of a schemer who has brought his plot to a triumphant issue.

Sibyl has one argument still to offer. The strongest.

"You tell me that my uncle has made a will in my favour, that he will leave me all his fortune," she says.

"Yes, that is a settled thing. You heard him say that we were to have his wealth—you and I."

"I did. And we can share it. Share it honourably and equally, without the hateful tie which would bring us nothing but misery. Release me from this entanglement, Mr. Pilgrim. Tell my uncle hat you would rather defer our marriage until you return from Calcutta. He is not likely to see that day. Do this, and I will pledge myself in any way that you may consider most binding. I will ign any document you choose to put before me, engaging myself o deliver over to you half my uncle's fortune, whatever it may be, he day I become possessed of it."

"A very liberal and business-like offer," exclaims Joel, with a uiet sneer, which freezes all hope. It is so pitiless! "But I would rather have the pretty wife and the whole of the fortune, as by the existing arrangement I shall. Of course I shall knock off a andsome sum for pin-money. Your uncle hints that your tastes re somewhat extravagant, and Calcutta is not a place to teach conomy. I shall not be a severe husband, and I shall like to see my wife the queen of taste and fashion."

Sibyl sits with her hands clasped on the table before her, earing, unheeding. She has made her last appeal, and she might as usefully have made it to stone. There is nothing for her now but flight. Yes, one alternative. She may confess all to Stephen Trenchard—tell him that she has been an impostor—that she has duped him into giving her his affection—that the wealth he has bequeathed to her will be shared by the son of his unforgiven foe.

No hope lies that way. She has played her desperate game to the last, and she must throw up the cards.

Once resolved, courage and calmness return together. She glances at the Swiss toy clock on the chimney-piece.

"Eleven o'clock, Mr. Pilgrim, and I am very tired. I really must wish you good night."

She rises, gathers together her dainty fancy work, closes her book, and holds out her hand to Joel Pilgrim.

But there is more of his native sunshine in Mr. Pilgrim's veins to-night than there was at noon to-day, and he is not to be satisfied with so cold a salutation from his affianced bride.

"You refused me my kiss this morning, Sibyl. I must exercise my privilege to-night."

His arm is round her, he tries to draw her towards him, but that slim form recoils from him as from something more hateful than death.

"Do not touch me," exclaims Sibyl, in a voice that is scarcely above a whisper. "You cannot guess how much I would dare to escape such pollution. Look at this," taking a small glass phial from her pocket, and holding it up before him. "Do you know what this is? Sure and instant death. I would rather this should pass my lips than that your lips should touch them."

"I did not know you were a member of the Borgia family, or that such delightful customs prevailed among young ladies in England," says Mr. Pilgrim, letting her go, and contemplating her excited countenance with a gloomy look. "But perhaps you are only playing with me, and that bottle of yours contains one of those homœopathic preparations so fashionable now-a-days, a globule of poison diluted with a gallon of water."

"It contains prussic acid, which I took from my uncle's surgery a few days ago, so that I might have one resource against all evils, even the horror of your touch."

"Not very complimentary to the man who is to be your husband next Saturday. Don't be foolish, Sibyl. Give me that bottle, and let me throw it under the grate."

"No, you shall not take it from me," exclaims Sibyl, clenching her hand upon the phial, so tightly that it would need some exercise of Mr. Pilgrim's brute force to take it from her.

"Keep it then," he cries savagely. "Keep it, and reconcile yourself to all the evil it may do you. You are a heartless and unreasonable woman, and deserve to suffer for your folly. Keep your deadly poison, but remember your English proverb which tells you that it is dangerous to play with edged tools. And so good night, Miss Faunthorpe. I'm afraid I shall have a vixen for a wife, and get the worst of it in our domestic quarrels."

Thus, with a sneer, he leaves her.

"No resource," murmurs Sibyl, "none but flight—or—" she looks at the little bottle, full of a colourless liquid—"or this."

CHAPTER XL.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF A DISCOVERY.

ALEXIS goes back to Cheswold Grange, and resumes the even tenor of his life, a prosperous country gentleman, with very little to occupy him, and plenty of leisure in which to muse upon destiny, and dream of the things that might have been. The hunting season has long been over. It is the time of roses, and he has no temptation to endanger his neck upon Bayard again just yet awhile. He rides his steady little brown mare in the shady roads and lanes round Cheswold, while Bayard stretches his noble limbs in the home paddock, and gathers strength for the crisp, clear days of October and the chill mists of November.

It is a pleasant life, but an idle one, and a thought too lonely. True that there is plenty of society in the neighbourhood, and Mr. Secretan, of Cheswold, is popular; but life cannot be a succession of dinner parties, and Alexis has little inclination for croquet and garden parties, archery, fancy fairs, and any of those small amusements which beguile the long days of a country summer.

The two young men have scarcely returned to the Grange when Richard Plowden declares that he must go home.

"I've been with you nearly a year, Alexis," he says. "I am sure you must be sick of my society."

"When I am, be sure I'll let you know it, Dick," answers the other, laughing. "You're the best company in the world to me, for you're a kind of second self. I can talk to you as I can talk to no one else. You know all my secrets."

"All of them?" asks Dick, gravely.

"Yes, Dick, all—or if there is a vague, undeveloped thought or dream I have not shared with you, it has not been for want of confidence in your fidelity."

"I believe that," replies Dick, deeply moved. "But I must go home all the same. This kind of life is all very well for a short time, but it can't go on—it would spoil me for the rough work-a-day world."

"Let it spoil you, Dick. Why should you ever go back to the work-a-day world? You are my adopted brother, as dear to me as if we had slept in the same cradle, or lain in the same mother's arms. My home is yours, my income yours, and if Fate cuts me off untimely you will not find yourself unprovided for. Your mother is happy with her lodgers and her housekeeping, to say nothing of the fernery, which she tells you has flourished under her care. Why talk of leaving me, Dick?"

"You are too good; and I am more grateful than any words of mine can tell. But I must go all the same."

"You are not happy with me, Dick?"

"I have been most happy with you."

"Have been. That means you are not happy now. It is you who are tired of my company. That long illness of mine wore you out. You had too much of me at Dorley Mill."

At the name of Dorley Mill a spasm of pain passes across Richard Plowden's face—so faint that it might have escaped a less watchful observer than Alexis. But Alexis is sorely puzzled by Dick's desire to leave him, and is watchful of his friend's countenance.

"Too much of your company—no, Alexis. You know that your company is like the wine of life for me."

"And yet you persist in leaving me. There must be some reason."

"There is a reason—one that I can never tell you. A foolish reason. But strong enough to send me away from Cheswold."

"And the roses, and the ferns, and all those bright things of summer you love so well—you to whom the hills and woods and wandering streams are new. You would exchange all the pleasures of the country for the Brompton Road and the ever-flowing stream of many-coloured omnibuses, the cry of the hawker, the reek of the ham and beef shop, the glare of the gin-palace? The reason must be a strong one, Dick."

"It is as strong as fate."

"And you will not trust me with it?"

"I cannot tell you my reasons. You would laugh at me, despise me."

"Try me, Dick. Suppose I can guess your secret."

"Oh no, no!" cries Dick, with alarm.

"Those days at Dorley Mill, when my broken ribs were slowly knitting themselves together again—peaceful, happy days, were they not, Dick? That quaint Elizabethan homestead seemed more like home to both of us than this good old house of mine. It had the atmosphere of home, which this has not. There is no such thing as home without the presence of a woman. We were very happy—in a tranquil, sleepy fashion—at Dorley, weren't we, Dick?"

"Very happy," answers Dick, looking down at an open book, the leaves of which he turns over recklessly, as if looking for some particular passage.

"And now I begin to fear that Dorley Mill was an unlucky place for both of us. Neither of us came away heart-whole."

"Alex," cries Dick, looking up.

"No half-confidences, old friend. You see I am not afraid to trust *you*. Such a confession comes amiss from me, you think—from me who am bound fast by an old tie—which, if the marriage could be broken by a wife's unkindness, might well have been cancelled for me last December, when I stood before that mercenary wife of mine and pleaded the cause of love against money. Do not be alarmed, Dick, I am not going to sophisticate. The old tie is binding, and the old bond shall be honoured, though it should keep me a lonely man for the rest of my days. But I may be forgiven if I have had my dream of what might have been—if I have thought how fair and perfect my life might be made in this good old home of mine, were I but free to seek Linda Challice for my wife."

"Yes," murmurs Dick, "I thought so."

"You thought that I was human, Dick, and that it was not easy for me to feel all the sweetness of Linda's society—to be sheltered and cherished by her kindness—to know that I owed my life to her patient tenderness, and withhold my heart from her altogether. My heart went out to her, Dick, unawares, but by not so much as a word or look did I ever betray my secret. I woke one day to a full knowledge of my peril, and the next day I left Dorley Mill."

"You acted nobly," cries Dick, clasping his friend's hand. "Yes, I suspected the truth, and it made my own thoughts all the more bitter. How could she think of me? What a worm I must seem to her beside you!"

"She shall think of you, Dick. She shall learn to know your noble heart—your talents—your love of all that is lofty and lovely in life. She shall learn to understand you and appreciate you as I do. Trust to time, Dick, and me. It shall be my task to win her for you."

"Impossible," sighs Dick. "She is won already, and not by me."

"Silence, Dick. There is treason against her in such an insinuation. She knew that I was married."

"She must have known it at the last, but I am not quite sure that she knew it at first, unless anything you said when you awoke from your delirium may have enlightened her. I don't think, somehow, that she did know it. Remember, you were a perfect stranger to her. You came to Dorley Mill as if you had dropped from the clouds. How should she know anything of your domestic history which has only been whispered amongst your neighbours?"

"You might have told her my painful story, Dick."

"It was not my business. It would have been an impertinence in me to gabble about your affairs. I felt assured that you would tell her."

"Why should I do so, Dick? I am not a coxcomb. I foresaw no peril to myself in my association with that sweet girl, still less did I imagine danger to her. I accepted all her bounties as if she had been verily a ministering angel lent to this lower world for a little while to be my comfort. Upon my word, Dick, I think there is a spice of folly—or unconscious jealousy, perhaps—in your notion that I am any more to Miss Challice than the traveller who fell by the wayside."

"I can read her face," answers Dick, sorrowfully, "and it has told me her secret."

Alexis is moved by this conviction of Richard Plowden's. For so little he could be glad. He sees the fair young face, the bended brow, the soft eyes which have so often avoided his own. Dare he interpret those signs—those little looks which he remembers so well—as the tokens of a hidden passion? Dare he suffer himself to believe that while Linda Challice ministered to him pity grew to love in her heart, as gratitude widened into love in his? The thought that it is so can bring him nothing but sorrow; yet he finds himself encouraging the fancy notwithstanding.

"I am a weak fool, Dick," he cries at last, after pacing the firelit library for some time; "and you ought not to say these things to me. Linda Challice does know that I have a wife. She learned it directly from my own lips; but only on the morning before I left Dorley. But she shall know all my wretched story. She shall know that I deserve her pity, though I dare not ask for her love. I am bound to pay one more visit to Dorley Mill, if it is only to repeat my thanks for all her goodness to me. I will go to-morrow. I have ordered a little present for her from London which I think she will like."

"She is not a girl to care for presents," says Dick.

"You sulky old bear! women love souvenirs and keepsakes."

"Yes, when they love the giver."

"You know that shabby silver watch she wears."

"It was her father's," growls Dick; "he wore it to the day of his death, or had it under his pillow on his death-bed. He died in Rome, you know, in something like impoverished circumstances. I dare say he had a fine gold hunter when his pictures were the fashion."

"Poor fellow! it was his watch, was it? Then I'm afraid Lin—— Miss Challice won't care for the one I've bought her."

Alexis takes a neat little morocco case out of a drawer in the library table, a dainty case lined with white velvet, on which reposes the most fascinating of watches—about the size of a florin. The case is dark purple enamel, with Linda's monogram in pearls, and round the watch is coiled a slender gold chain set with pearls.

"Rather too pretty for a miller's granddaughter," says Dick. "But I've no doubt she'll be pleased. Did you buy anything for Mr. Benfield?"

"Yes, Dick, I didn't forget the miller;" and from another drawer Alexis produces a splendid meerschaum pipe. "The old gentleman can smoke his tobacco in that when he sits by the fire after supper."

"I don't suppose it will draw as well as his clay," murmurs Dick.

The drawing-room at the Grange seems more than usually empty that evening when the two young men leave the dining-table. It is a wet night, and they lack the amusement which the gardens and stable yard afford them in the fine weather. Alexis has read all the magazines and newspapers, and is hardly in the humour for serious literature, although all his favourite authors, newly bound and newly arranged upon the shelves in the library, invite him to study. His mind is disturbed, he knows not why. He takes up a volume of Tennyson from the table and turns the leaves idly till he comes to that exquisite poem called "Love and Duty." This he reads aloud, Richard Plowden listening intently.

"That was written by a MAN, Dick," he says when he has finished. "Byron-worshipper as I am, I confess that there is more stamina in that than in all Childe Harold's wailing against destiny. But then Byron died in the flower of his manhood. We know not what noble fruit the tree might have borne had it grown to maturity. Byron never came to the age at which Scott began to be a poet, or at which Goethe wrote his masterpiece."

After this Alexis and his friend talk of their favourite poets, and both brighten a little as their thoughts drift away from their own individual sorrows.

Soon after breakfast next morning. Alexis mounts Titmouse and rides down to Dorley, through the perfumed lanes where the dog-roses and woodbine make a tangle of flowers among the young oak saplings and the sturdy hawthorn bushes. Dorley Mill is looking its prettiest as he rides along the winding track that leads to it. Trot is sitting in the porch playing with a very fat black and white puppy with a round stupid-looking head, a puppy that has not long been added to the population of Dorley.

At the sight of Alexis, Trot lets fall his pinafore, and gives the puppy a sudden drop in the world. It is the youthful animal's first experience of the uncertainty of friendship, and he yelps out his remonstrance against life's delusions.

"Mammie!" yells Trot, "mammie, come out, it's the genlamum." In spite of their familiarity, Trot has never learnt to call Alexis anything but the "genlamum."

Linda is not forthcoming, and Trot remembers presently that mammie has gone down to the village.

"She not be long," says Trot. "I'll show oo my noo puppy;" and he introduces that animal, held firmly by the tail.

"Daddie says he grow big—ever so big—bigger than Trot," says the boy, opening his eyes tremendously wide. They are hazel eyes, with lashes of gold, which time will darken to brown.

"I'll come in and wait, Trot," says Alexis, dismounting, and tying Titmouse to the gatepost. She is a lazy animal, and has no objection to stand there nibbling the grass by the wayside.

He goes in at the familiar porch, beneath which he was carried unconscious on the day of his accident, and seats himself by Linda's work-table. How pleasant the room is to his sight! how home-like! There are the books Linda read to him—the books that seemed to breathe a deeper pathos and holier tenderness when she read. There is her drawing-board with an unfinished landscape, a wind of the river overshadowed by willows. There are the flowers her hand has arranged; there the sofa on which he passed so many reposeful hours of unthinking happiness.

"Why did I permit myself to be so happy?" he thinks, in self-reproach. "It was a pleasant dream, but the return to life's dull reality is a little hard to bear."

He rouses himself from his musing mood, and begins to talk to Trot, taking Trot and the puppy on his knee together. Trot stops tolerably quiet; but the puppy begins a perambulation—a voyage of discovery up and down Mr. Secretan's coat sleeves and collar, and even on to his head, which is more familiar than agreeable.

"Well, Trot, you haven't forgotten me, I hope?"

"I not forgotten oo, but I don't love oo no more," replies Trot, decisively.

"Not love me any more? Oh, Trot, that is cruel. Why not?"

"Why oo go 'way and make mammie cry?" demands Trot, facing the accused with magisterial severity.

Alexis crimsons at the interrogation.

"I never made mammie cry," he falters.

"That's a tory. Oo did. She cried the day oo went,—she cried a little every day, she said it was a headache,—Trot knows better, she not such a coward as to cry for a headache. Trot doesn't cry when his head aches, he's a man!"

"Yes, but mammie's only a woman, Trot, and a headache might make her cry if it was a very bad one. Mammie wouldn't tell a story."

"She says *I* mustn't," responds Trot, "but I think she did. Grown-up people may do anything. Mayn't they tell tories?"

"No, Trot, not good people. Only wicked people tell stories."

A shadow flits across the threshold, and the subject of their conversation enters. Trot scrambles off Mr. Secretan's knee and runs to his adopted mother.

"I told him he was naughty to go away and make oo cry," says Trot, "and he says he didn't."

"Foolish Trot. What silly notions you get into your head!" says Linda, bending over the child and blushing deeply.

Alexis sees the blush, and he sees something more than that. He sees that Linda has changed within the ten days that have gone by since he left Dorley Mill. A settled pallor succeeds that fleeting red. Her eyes are sunken, and there is a dark line beneath them, which deepens their colour, and gives a pathetic expression that touches him to the heart. She has cared for him, she has been sorry for him, and he, poor fettered wretch, dare say no word of his care or his sorrow for her. She must drink the cup of humiliation to the dregs, and know that the man to whom her innocent heart has gone forth is the property of another.

"I have been anxious to come and tell you once more how gratefully I shall ever remember your goodness to me," says Alexis, after they have talked about Trot and Trot's puppy for a few minutes. The puppy is to grow up into a Newfoundland if it realizes the expectations of its friends, but there is an element of uncertainty in these things, and Alexis has a lurking conviction that this puppy will develop into the most mongrel of mongrels.

"Believe me, neither my grandfather nor I consider our care of you a matter for gratitude, Mr. Secretan," replies Linda. "Providence brought you to our door. We should have been very unchristian-like if we had not cared for you. I think you must know that if you had been the poorest tramp that ever dropped down on the road-side we should have done the same."

"I am quite sure of that," replies Alexis, "and that is why I have never ventured to speak about the expense that my illness must have entailed upon you."

"Pray relieve your mind upon that score. Your housekeeper sent all the broths and jellies, hothouse fruits, poultry, game, and wines from the Grange. I think you only cost us a few new-laid eggs and a little milk. Mrs. Bodlow kept our larder almost too well supplied in her anxiety that you should have nourishing diet."

"Mrs. Bodlow only did her duty. But lightly as you regard the obligation, Miss Challice, it is one which I shall carry to my dying day. If ever I am inclined to make a bad use of this life of mine, I will remember how hard you strove to win it back from the grave. I have ventured to bring you something—a little gold watch, with your initials on the back, which I hope you will wear sometimes in remembrance of the many weary hours you spent by the stranger's sick bed."

"I will wear it always," replies Linda, with tears in her eyes.

"Oo can't wear two wathes," exclaims Trot. "Oo wear oor fazer's wath."

"I shall keep that among my treasures, Trot; but it is nearly worn out, poor old watch, and I am sure this will keep better time."

"Oo like this best 'cause the genlamum give it oo," cries the far-seeing Trot.

Alexis pretends not to hear this last observation, and produces the meerschaum pipe, which Linda admires amazingly, and which Trot wants to have in his mouth and to make believe to smoke, as he does sometimes with daddie's homelier clay.

"Dear little Trot," exclaims Alexis, "how your small voice would enliven us at Cheswold Grange. You cannot imagine how dull it is there, Miss Challice, in the long summer evenings."

"No? And yet I think I know how long the summer evenings can be. But Trot would not do much to enliven them. He is worn out by seven o'clock. Oh, by the way, talking of Trot, I have made one little discovery since you left us."

"What is that?" cries Alexis, eagerly.

"Don't let me raise false expectations. It is such a trifle, scarcely worth mentioning, but you seemed anxious to find out our little darling's parentage, and this seems a clue, however small."

"What is it? Pray tell me. I am most anxious, more anxious than I can explain."

"Pray do not excite yourself, Mr. Secretan. I was looking over some papers in my desk, the other day, when I came upon the blank sheet of note-paper which contained that last remittance for Trot,—I remember it on account of the peculiar way in which it was folded,—and I noticed for the first time that there was a name stamped upon it in the corner, the name of the stationer who supplied it, no doubt."

"Yes, of course."

"I have saved the sheet of paper to show you. The name is Morgan, Redcastle."

Alexis starts from his chair and seizes Trot as if he would take possession of him on the instant. He is speechless with surprise.

"You know the name of that place."

"Know it? yes. I have reason, bitter reason, to know it. A small town in Yorkshire. And that money, obviously sent by the child's mother, was sent from Redcastle?"

"One would suppose so."

"There can be no doubt of it. Tell me, Miss Challice, if I were to show you a photograph of the woman you sheltered, the mother of this boy, would you recognise her? The picture I shall show you was taken in the bloom of her beauty. You saw her—should it indeed be the same woman—faded, worn by care and deprivation. Should you know the face under such altered conditions?"

"I should know it anywhere. But why should you be so agitated? Why should the mere name of this place excite you so much?"

"Ask me no questions till I come back to you with the photograph," says Alexis. "I shall go and return as fast as my horse will carry me."

"Pray be careful. Remember——"

"That I have been thrown! Trust me, dear Miss Challice. I will run no risks. I am too anxious to settle the question of Trot's parentage."

He takes the child in his arms, kisses him as he has never kissed him yet in all their friendly companionship, gives him back to Linda, and runs out at the gate.

He has mounted Titmouse and is out of sight before Linda has recovered from her astonishment at his agitation.

"Genlamum's in a hurry!" exclaims Trot.

CHAPTER XLI.

A FATHER'S CLAIM.

Alexis scarcely knows what he is doing during that scamper back to Cheswold Grange.

Titmouse, inspirited by the knowledge that she is going home to her stable and two o'clock feed, throws her shoulders forward and sends out her feet, trotting as if for a wager.

"Take off her bridle and give her some corn," says Alexis to the groom who receives him. "I shall want her again in ten minutes."

He goes to the library, unlocks a despatch box, and takes out an oblong velvet case, containing his wife's portrait—a picture taken by a famous photographer during their bright Parisian honeymoon,—the portrait of a girl-bride, lovely, elegantly dressed, smiling at the unknown future, and unconscious that these happy, idle honeymoon hours were eating up the capital that should have served to start husband and wife in the business of life. It is a photograph of Sibyl at her best—before secret cares and hypocrisies had wrought their lines on her fair young face.

Alexis contemplates the picture regretfully for a few moments before he puts it in his pocket.

"Yes, she was very lovely then," he tells himself. "And there is nothing in this face that bespeaks a heart capable of treachery or deceit. It was poverty's bitter school that spoiled her. Some noble spirits grow strong by treading the rough ways of life—hers was too weak to survive the ordeal of misfortune. Poor child, she must have suffered!"

He is on Titmouse again and returning to Dorley in a few minutes, very much against the mare's inclination. She indulges in a stubborn crawl, or, being touched up with the whip, jogs and jolts her rider in an irregular trot, expressive of supreme ill-temper. Urged out of this, she sets off in a furious canter, as if to inform him that she has some "go" left in her yet, in spite of ill-usage, and may contrive to pitch him over her head if he is too aggravating.

These devices finally bring Alexis to Dorley, where he finds Linda and Trot in the front garden, evidently on the watch for him.

"I am so glad you have returned," cries Linda. "You have made me quite miserable."

"Forgive me, dear Miss Challice, but if you knew what hopes that one little word Redcastle has raised in my mind! See here"—he takes the case from his pocket and shows her Sibyl's photograph,—"does that face remind you of any face you have ever seen before?"

"Yes," she answers, pale to the lips, but without an instant's hesitation, "it is the portrait of Trot's mother. She was not so beautiful as that. She was thin and worn and haggard, but I should recognise the eyes and mouth anywhere. It is she."

"This is the portrait of my wife, Linda; and Trot, the helpless baby you adopted in order to save him from the hazards of his mother's distraction or despair, is my son."

"You told me your son was dead."

"I was taught to believe so. My wife, for some mysterious reason, told me that cruel lie. She was ashamed, perhaps, of having abandoned our child to the care of another, and feared to tell me the truth."

"Are you sure?" falters Linda. "You are not deceiving yourself and me?"

"If you are sure that this picture is the portrait of Trot's mother, there can be no doubt that Trot is my son."

"And you will take him away from me," says Linda, piteously; "just when he has grown most dear. After all I have suffered—all I have borne patiently for his sake—I am to lose him. That is hard."

"If you knew how I have pined for a son, Linda—what day-dreams I have woven about my little one's image—how bitter a grief I felt when I was told that wicked lie about his death—you would understand my rapture at finding him, my eagerness to claim him for my own—my darling, my hope, my precious care, heir to the fortune that Providence has dropped into my lap—poorly deserved on my part Heaven knows. He shall be better worthy of it."

"Yes," murmurs Linda, faintly, "I can understand. It is only natural. He is your son; your rights are sacred."

"And you have suffered for his sake, Linda. Your generosity has been rewarded by the world's injustice. But I can set all right. I shall claim him for my own, and every one round and about Cheswold and Dorley shall know all his story. Yes, I will not blush to tell the whole bitter truth. How my wife left me in poverty, and how my son was born in a workhouse."

They are standing in the parlour, Trot watching their excited countenances, with wonder depicted upon his own.

"You have a right to take him away," says Linda, sadly, "but I think you will take all the sunshine of our lives with him. My grandfather is almost as fond of him as I am."

"I am not going to dissever old links, Linda. He shall come often to see you. He shall be taught to know you as the guardian angel of his infancy; he shall always remember his first home."

"Yes, but it will be his home no longer," replies Linda, with a sigh.

Alexis is silent. He feels that he must seem a wretch, a destroyer, entering this happy household only to ruin its joy. But how can he forego his claim? How can he relinquish the delight of watching his son's infancy develop into boyhood—guiding the baby mind, making the boy at once pupil and plaything, source of all his pleasures in the present and all his hopes in the future?

At this juncture Trot, who has listened intently, arrives at the comprehension that he has a personal interest in the conversation. He catches at the idea that he is to be taken away—transferred from mammie to the genlamum, and he suddenly bursts in upon the conversation with a dismal howl.

"Me won't be took away; me stay with mammie," cries the boy, and he clambers up into Linda's arms, and clings there as if resolved to resist any attempt at dislodging him.

"What, Trot," cries Alexis, smiling at the little one's excitement, "won't you come and live with me, and have a dear little Shetland pony to ride, and a big garden to play in, and a rocking-horse,—and a—lots of plum cakes and picture-books?" Here Alexis's knowledge of juvenile weaknesses fails him, and he knows not what further temptation to offer.

"Me won't have pony, me not want oor garden, me got nice big garden, me want mammie," cries Trot, and he clings still tighter to Linda.

"Trot, shall I tell you a secret?"

"'Ess," says Trot, who thinks that a secret must needs be something worth hearing.

"You must come and live with me, Trot, my darling. God meant you and me to live together. I'm your father!"

"No, you not," screams the boy, "you're the genlamum with the broken arm. Me never have no fazer."

"And you won't come to live at the Grange? Such a large garden, six times as big as the garden here, and a Shetland pony with a long tail."

"Me won't," cries Trot, emphatically. "Bozer de pony!"

"Trot has decided, Miss Challice," says Alexis, gravely. "If I were ungrateful enough, selfish enough, to wish to take him from you, his childish heart is true and fast. He shall stay with you, since you wish it, for the next few years at any rate. This shall be his home, and he shall come to Cheswold only as a visitor. You will let me have him sometimes?"

"Let you have him! Oh, Mr. Secretan, are you not too generous in consenting to leave him with me?"

"I should be an ungrateful hound if I could refuse. You have made my son's infancy bright and happy. You have saved him from the evils of poverty—from his mother's selfishness. How can I be grateful enough to you?"

"Only let me keep my darling a little longer, and I am more than recompensed. I must be proud and happy too, when I have recovered a little from this surprise, to know that he is your son—that his future will be bright and prosperous—his worldly position honourable,—to think that my little waif and stray should be the future squire of Cheswold. My grandfather will be so pleased. It is a triumph for me over him, dear old man, for he said that I was very foolish to adopt a nameless child, and now my dearest has name and fortune, home and father."

"We will make a good man of him between us, Miss Challice," says Alexis, more elated by this discovery than he was by the inheritance of Miss Secretan's estate. He has no doubt as to Trot's identity—there seems to him no room for doubt, yet he is anxious to make things as certain as possible—to secure independent evidence in case his claim to his son should ever be disputed.

He goes back to the Grange only to get a fresh horse, and then rides into the quiet old cathedral town to talk the matter over with Mr. Scrodgers. He does not consider the provincial solicitor a Mansfield or a Cockburn; but Mr. Scrodgers is the best legal intellect available on the spot, and to Mr. Scrodgers he goes.

The family solicitor listens to all Alexis has to tell with the gravity of a learned owl that has lived a century or so in the same ivy bush. He contracts his eyebrows, he purses up his lips, and looks as if he had known the whole story before, but, for some wise reason he had kept his knowledge to himself.

"A curious case, Mr. Secretan," he says at last, "a very curious case. It's lucky your estate is not entailed."

"Why so?"

"There might have been difficulties in the way of succession. It might not be easy to identify this infant—born in such a very irregular manner—as your son and heir. There might be suspicions. The heir-at-law might file a bill in Chancery. I should consider it a very hazardous business were your estate entailed; but you as an independent man, fettered by no entail, may leave your real property to Tom, Dick, or Harry. I should recommend you to take this infant into your house at once, let him bear your name, let him be recognised by all your acquaintances as your son."

"Yes, I shall take care of that. I shall tell everybody. But there is a difficulty about bringing him into my house. The lady who brought him up—who rescued him from I know not what misery—has a claim upon his affection, the strongest, and as strong a claim on my gratitude. To take him away from her would be almost to break her heart."

"Almost, not quite. There's a long distance between the two adverbs," replies the cynical Scrodgers. "Most women have their hearts almost broken once in their lives. Give her a new bonnet."

"You do not know the lady, sir. She is not a woman to be solaced by a new bonnet."

"Hasn't she a head?" asks Mr. Scrodgers. "I never knew a woman, with a head, that a bonnet wouldn't pacify. Half the cases at the assizes, in which the female is a plaintiff, might be settled out of court if the defendant knew when and how to offer the *solatium* of a bonnet."

"I see, Mr. Scrodgers, you are a bachelor and a misogynist," says Alexis, smilingly.

"No, sir," replies the lawyer, "I am a misogynist, and a married man."

"The first thing I have to do is to alter my will," says Alexis, returning to the business question.

"Decidedly. If you are convinced that this infant—hereinbefore named—is your son, you had better make a will in his favour."

"Prepare one as fast as you can, Mr. Scrodgers, leaving the bequest to my good friend Plowden just as it stands."

"You must have trustees in case of your dying before the child attains his majority."

"Make Plowden trustee."

"You should have a second in the event of Mr. Plowden's death."

"How you lawyers remind us of our mortality! Well, make Miss Challice the second trustee and guardian of the boy in case of my death. Nobody will ever love him better than she does."

"And in the event of her marriage——"

"Marriage would make no difference in her. She would always love my boy."

Mr. Scrodgers relieves his doubtful mind by a faint smile. His idea of marriage is that it makes a very great difference. To his legal mind marriage transforms a man. Even the will he made as a bachelor is no longer valid, proving that in the eye of the law the married man and the bachelor are two distinct personages.

"Then you would recommend me to get together all the evidence I can bearing upon my boy's birth," says Alexis.

"I think it would be wise to do so. The fact of your parentage may never be disputed. You can dispose of the Cheswold estate as you choose, but still it might be well to have all necessary documents—an attested copy of your marriage certificate, and so on."

"Yes, I was a reckless fellow when I married. Heaven knows what became of the certificate. My wife may have kept it. Certainly I didn't take any care of it. The parson had made her my wife. That was all I thought about on that bewildering day."

"Then you had better get a copy of the register without delay."

"Yes, and I will go to the woman with whom my wife and I lodged. She will remember that my wife was expecting to become a mother when she left me. If that woman is to be found I will get from her a written declaration of that fact."

"It would be as well to do so," says Mr. Scrodgers, approvingly, and Alexis leaves him to prepare the new will, which he is to bring to the Grange early next morning.

"Stay," says the lawyer on the threshold. "You haven't told me the infant's Christian name."

"He was christened William."

"No other name?"

"I believe not. But you can fill in the names to-morrow. I will ask that question in the meantime."

Alexis goes back to Cheswold pondering on the lawyer's advice about his son. Mr. Scrodgers has distinctly said that it is for the child's welfare, for the security of his future position, that he should be domiciled with his father; and Alexis longs to have the little one under the same roof with him, to see him daily, hourly, to watch over him sleeping and waking, to make him his plaything and companion. Against this natural desire there is the promise he has made to Linda Challice—the debt of gratitude he owes her. Hard to break that promise—hard to ignore that debt.

CHAPTER XLII.

A WEDDING EVE.

The days pass with a frightful rapidity as it seems to Sibyl after that Tuesday night on which Joel Pilgrim came back from York with the marriage licence.

Stephen Trenchard is ailing, and keeps his room for the greater part of the time, but Dr. Mitsand, a most careful man in all critical cases, comes to Lancaster Lodge only once a day, and there is no hint of danger. The doctor's manner has that pleasant vivacity which suits a trifling derangement of the patient's system. He sits by the bedside and discourses upon local topics—the water company, sewage, and other agreeable subjects. On Thursday morning Sibyl lies in wait for him on the landing outside Mr. Trenchard's room.

"You do not think my uncle very ill, do you, Dr. Mitsand?" she asks, with evident anxiety, a solicitude which the kindly old doctor thinks highly creditable to her, and which he remembers afterwards—to her disadvantage.

"Certainly not, my dear Miss Faunthorpe," he replies, cheerily, "there is a little prostration; our dear patient is very feeble;

that is only to be expected at his time of life. There is a wonderful reserve of vigour about his constitution, exceptional recuperative power; he is all muscle and sinew—no superfluous flesh; and this, taken in conjunction with his temperate habits, would lead one to anticipate a long life. I fear his mind has been a little troubled lately. Very foolish. A man in his position should worry himself about nothing. But no doubt wealth has its responsibilities."

"Then there is no reason for alarm?"

"Not the slightest. If there were I should call in my friend, Dr. Wilmot, of Krampston, for a consultation. Your uncle's is not a life to be trifled with," adds Dr. Mitsand, solemnly, as if the life of a millionaire were a much bigger thing in creation than the existences of the vulgar herd. "Pray don't be uneasy, my dear young lady. And now I look at you I fear you have been fretting. You are looking pale and fatigued. And this little hand," as he shakes hands with her, "is very feverish." He lays his finger on her wrist. "Good gracious, what a pulse! This won't do, my dear Miss Faunthorpe. Mental disturbance has been going on there. I'll send you a composing draught. You must keep yourself quiet for the next day or two, especially as you are so soon to start upon a long voyage. Your dear uncle has told me of the interesting event which is to take place next Saturday. Very sudden! On account of Mr. Pilgrim's recall to Calcutta, yes—yes, I understand, and a very quiet wedding, your uncle's health not allowing—of course, of course. I shall take the liberty to be present in the church, in order to have the pleasure of congratulating you. I used to think our young friend Stormont was to be the happy man; and then there was some talk of your becoming mistress of the How; but you have managed to deceive us all, you see."

"Yes," falters Sibyl, with a sickly smile.

"Don't forget to take the composing draught. Good-bye."

Distinctly does Dr. Mitsand remember the anxious look she turns upon him as he leaves her.

"That's not a happy marriage," he tells his daughters at luncheon, "it's a case of hands, not hearts, my dears. All money, money, money! with these self-made men that question swallows up every other consideration."

It is long since Redcastle has had such a delightful subject for gossip as this suddenly arranged wedding. Mrs. Chasubel has made a round of morning calls in order to tell her dear friends the startling news, and the marriage has been discussed from every point of view, the general idea being that Mr. Trenchard is a tyrant, and Sibyl the victim of his mercenary views. Mrs. Stormont's particular idea—which she imparts in confidence to everybody—is that Sibyl was devotedly attached to her dear

Frederick, and that it is to prevent her eloping with Fred that Mr. Trenchard has hurried on her espousals with Joel Pilgrim.

Inexorable time, like death, advances with measured tread. It is Friday, the eve of that ill-omened bridal, and Sibyl sits alone in her pretty morning-room—the room in which Joel found her on his return from York. She has made all her arrangements for her journey, packed her trunks, and labelled them for the steamer *Ganges*. Her own firm hand has written those labels—Mrs. Pilgrim, passenger to Calcutta—Joel looking on all the time with that ugly smile of his. One small leather bag is unlabelled, and in that Sibyl has put her little stock of trinkets, a small supply of under-linen, and the marble-paper covered book containing the diary she kept at Mrs. Hazleton's. She has kept no diary at Lancaster Lodge. She is alone now, exhausted by a long morning devoted to the task of packing. Marion has been with her, pretending to help, full of exclamations and congratulations, wonderment and curiosity.

"It doesn't seem so much of a match after all," Marion has observed candidly. "But I suppose this Mr. Pilgrim is awfully rich, and money is what you like, Sibyl. However, I must say if I had been you, I should have tried to lead Sir Wilford Cardonnel on a little further. He did seem very much taken with you, and every one was surprised that it only ended in a flirtation. But men are such deceivers, as some one says in an old song—one foot on somewhere, and one on somewhere else to one thing constant never."

Sibyl has contrived to get rid of her sister a little before dinner-time. Marion is to be at the wedding, and is to officiate as sole bridesmaid, but there has not been time for her to get a new dress made, a fact which she does not omit to bewail with much lamentation.

"It's the worst apology for a wedding *I* ever heard of," she remarks, "but I suppose you'll recompense yourself for all this with balls and parties when you get to Calcutta."

"Yes," answers Sibyl, with a faint smile, "I shall enjoy myself immensely in Calcutta."

It is seven o'clock, a lovely summer evening, and Sibyl sits by the disordered table, scattered with books and papers. She is very pale, and there is a look of apathy in her face and attitude, as if she had abandoned all effort and surrendered herself to fate.

She is startled from this blank listlessness by the announcement of Sir Wilford Cardonnel. No visit could surprise her more than this at such a time.

"Sir Wilford told me to say that he wishes most particularly to see you alone, ma'am," says the servant; "he will not detain you long."

"You had better bring him up here. Mr. Pilgrim is in the drawing-room, I suppose?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"There is not much to attract him now in this white, wretched face," thinks Sibyl, with a hurried look at the glass, which reflects the shadow of a vanished beauty.

Sir Wilford enters breathless, and evidently strongly agitated.

"My dear Miss Faunthorpe," he says hurriedly, "I only came home from the north this afternoon, and heard of this intended marriage. I rode over at once. Can I be of any use? You honoured me with your confidence, and I told you that if ever the hour should come when you would need a friend, you might command me. Let me be your friend to-day. Let me stand between you and the tyranny that is being practised—let me save you from——"

"A crime! You are all that is good and generous, Sir Wilford; and if I needed help I would ask for yours. But I need none."

"What do you mean? Your marriage is appointed for to-morrow morning. You, the wife of another man, are to be married to this Mr. Pilgrim."

"The marriage is appointed for to-morrow, but no such marriage will take place."

"How will you prevent it?"

"In a very simple manner. The bride will be missing."

"You are going away?"

"Yes. I am left with but one resource—flight! I shall be far away from Redcastle at eleven o'clock to-morrow."

"You are sure of being able to escape—sure that no coercion will be used?"

"I think not. I have acted my part carefully during the last few days, and Mr. Pilgrim believes that I am resigned to the inevitable. My trunks are all packed for India. I have labelled them with my own hands."

"And you have made every arrangement for going away?" asks Sir Wilford, anxiously. "You have friends to whom you can go?"

"Yes, I have made all arrangements. I have decided where to go," replies Sibyl after a pause.

"Pray trust me," pleads Sir Wilford, earnestly. "Think of me no longer as your lover, but your friend only. You must need friendly counsel. Do not take any step unadvisedly. You have played a desperate game for your uncle's fortune, and, as it now turns out, a losing game. Would it not be wiser—better in every way, even at this last moment, to confess the truth to your uncle? He might forgive you. You might even retain your hold upon his affection."

"Impossible. You do not know my uncle Trenchard as I do. I thank you for your friendship, Sir Wilford, but this is a case in which advice is useless. There is but one course open to me. It is one that I ought to have taken long ago, perhaps—the only straight and womanly course. But I have stubbornly pursued my own plan, and the end is failure."

"If you would only confide in me—if you would only tell me where you are going—to whom?"

"I am going to my husband."

"Then I can say no more. I feel that you are taking the right course. If—if——" here Sir Wilford hesitates and blushes—"if you should be in want of ready money for your travelling expenses, or for any emergency which you may not now foresee, pray suffer me to be your banker. I cashed a cheque at the bank as I came up the town," taking out a well-filled pocket-book. "Let me lend you fifty or a hundred in small notes."

"You are too good," exclaims Sibyl, touched by his thoughtfulness. "But I have money, and money's worth which will serve me abundantly. I promise that if ever I am in desperate need of help—in such need as my husband and I have known in the past—I will apply to you. I will not be too proud to be a petitioner."

"Thanks for that promise. And now good-bye. I will not intrude upon you any longer; but if anything should happen within the next few hours—if there should be any attempt at constraint on the part of your uncle, or Mr. Pilgrim, send a messenger to me, and I will be at your side as soon as my horse can carry me; or I will stay in Redcastle to-night, if you like, at the "Coach and Horses," so as to be nearer at hand in case I am wanted."

"Believe me, there is no occasion. If the worst comes I have but to declare my marriage."

"Then good-bye. I will not wish that we may meet under happier circumstances, for it will be happier for me not to see you. But I do most heartily wish you every happiness Providence can bestow."

"I am not very hopeful," answers Sibyl, with a sigh. "I begin to think that I flung away my chance of happiness when I tried to win fortune."

And thus they part, Sir Wilford honestly anxious for the welfare of the woman he has loved, Sibyl touched by his devotion.

She goes down to the drawing-room presently, and finds Joel Pilgrim walking up and down in the twilight, with by no means a radiant brow.

"You have had a visitor," he says, frowning upon her as she enters.

"Only Sir Wilford Cardonnel, to offer me his congratulations," she answers, lightly.

"Only your former admirer," sneers Joel. "I should hardly have thought he would have considered your marriage a subject for his congratulations."

"He is more generous than you give him credit for being."

"So it seems. I don't, as a rule, credit my acquaintance with an unlimited amount of generosity."

They dine together *tête-à-tête*, and Sibyl seems at her brightest throughout the meal, which is conducted with the strictest ceremony, and lasts a long time. Gladly would she have escaped the weariness of Mr. Pilgrim's detested society for these last few hours, but she wishes to disarm suspicion by every means in her power, so as to leave herself free and unfettered at the last.

Her fascinations, which have stood her in such good stead with the rest of the world, seem to be wasted on Joel Pilgrim. He is gloomy and absent-minded all dinner-time, eats little, but drinks a good deal, and when Sibyl leaves him to return to the drawing-room he does not follow her with lover-like haste, but sits brooding over his wine for half an hour, and then goes straight upstairs to Stephen Trenchard's room.

Mr. Trenchard is lying on the sofa, wrapped in his dressing-gown, with all the apparatus of invalidism around him, medicine bottles, hothouse grapes, soda water on the table by his side, a fire burning on the hearth, though it is nearly midsummer, for ill-health has made the Anglo-Indian inclined to chilliness and shiverings.

He looks up with a frown as Joel enters.

"I thought you were never coming near me any more," he says fretfully.

"I have been devoting myself to my intended bride. Such affection as she lavishes upon me deserves some return."

"Spare that poor child your sneers. She is much too good for you. Have you succeeded?"

"Entirely. The bank consents to discount my bills for the required amount. I have told them that I am buying an estate in this neighbourhood, and have to complete the purchase to-morrow."

"Have they sent you the money?" asks Mr. Trenchard, eagerly.

"No. But I shall have it to-morrow morning. I have telegraphed them that the purchase is to be completed to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and so it is, only it is another kind of purchase—the purchase of a lovely wife—which is to be concluded at that hour. I shall have the money—ten notes for a thousand each—by the first post to-morrow morning."

"I'm glad of that."

"You are drawing the life-blood out of the concern, remember. There is very little hope of the business surviving such a withdrawal of capital."

"Then, my dear Joel, it must go. If it were a question of capital you might have some occasion to look unhappy about it, but as I am only absorbing your superfluous credit——"

"Superfluous," echoes Joel, derisively.

"Yes, my dear Joel, a man of your abilities should be able to extend his credit to an almost illimitable measure. The more he owes, the more reason his creditors have for upholding his credit. Debt is the most solid foundation a commercial house can be planted upon, for its pillars have their bases in other people's pockets. You're sure the bank will send the money?"

"As sure as one can be of anything in this world."

"Remember, no money no marriage. And a telegram to my Calcutta lawyer to make short work of Pilgrim and Company."

"I understand. No quarter. Don't be uneasy. Your demands shall be met and fully satisfied.

* * * * *

It is midnight, and Lancaster Lodge is at rest. A light still burns, as it burns all night in Mr. Trenchard's room, brighter than the ordinary lamps of a sick chamber, a light by which the invalid can read if he pleases; for Mr. Trenchard's slumbers are often disturbed, and in every night he has some wakeful hours. Podmore, the butler, who sleeps in the room over his master's, comes down at stated intervals to give the invalid his medicine. A secondary door near the head of the bed in Mr. Trenchard's room opens on to a small landing on the back staircase leading to the servants' quarters. By this servants' staircase Podmore descends and ascends; through this door, almost hidden by the ample draperies of the tall Arabian bed, he enters and departs, noiseless as a ghost in the silent watches of the night.

Mr. Trenchard has protested more than once that he is quite well enough to look after his own medicine, and wakeful enough to take it at the appointed hours; but Dr. Mitsand has laid a stress upon the matter, and has insisted upon Podmore being responsible for the regular administration of those gentle tonics, not strong enough to hurt a baby and too mild to take effect upon the constitution of a healthy rabbit. Whereby Podmore's nights are made a burden to him from the necessity of arousing himself at certain intervals, and the ticking of his big silver watch under his pillow is as the stroke of doom.

Sibyl spends the quiet hour between midnight and one o'clock in writing to her uncle Stephen. That which she dares not tell him she finds courage to write, knowing that her letter can only reach his hands after she has left Redcastle, in all probability for ever. If he is desperately angry, as she believes he will be, she will not see his anger. If it is in his nature to forgive her, severance may help to soften his feelings and touch his heart. After all it is just possible that the hold she has obtained upon his affections is too strong to be loosened, and that love may extinguish wrath. She would have been more ready to hope this before the coming of Joel Pilgrim, but she fancies that his presence under that roof has changed her uncle's feelings towards her, that as Joel's influence has increased hers has grown less.

In that letter she tells Stephen Trenchard the true story of her marriage—tells how from utter destitution, with starvation staring her in the face she fled to him for shelter and comfort. Of her hope of inheriting his fortune she says nothing, but her story in all other respects is fully and truthfully told.

"When I first came beneath your roof," she writes, "I hoped to be able some day to tell you of my marriage, to win your pity and regard for my husband; but when I discovered your rooted hatred of his name and race, when I found how deeply the old wound still rankled, I lost courage and kept my secret, at the hazard of seeming the worst of deceivers should you ever discover the truth.

"The hour has come when I can keep my secret no longer. I go out into the world to seek my husband, to share his home, however humble or however wretched. If you can bring yourself to forgive me, if you can believe that I have been grateful for all your goodness, as Heaven knows I have been, if you can take the more generous view of all past wrongs and extend your kindness to the guiltless son of your enemy it shall need but one word to bring me back to you.

"Your grateful and dutiful niece,
"SIBYL SECRETAN."

She feels a thrill of joy and pride as she signs her own rightful name for the first time since she left her husband. Even in this hour of uncertainty—the wide world, so cruel to unprotected poverty, all before her—she is glad that the mask has been thrown aside, and that she is her honest self once more.

She addresses the letter to Stephen Trenchard in a bold, firm hand, and places it conspicuously on the mantelpiece of her little sitting-room, where it must be seen by the first person who enters the room next morning.

"I have played my game and lost!" she thinks, as she lies down for a few hours, if possible to rest, sleep she knows to be impossible. "If I had won I wonder whether success would ever have recompensed me for all I have suffered from the bitterness of an acted lie—for the many hours in which I have pretended to be happy with a gnawing pain at my heart?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE PASSING-BELL.

ABOUT half-past nine o'clock on that Saturday morning which has been talked of as Sibyl Faunthorpe's wedding-day, Redcastle is disturbed by a sound of ill omen. No blithe marriage peal rings out on the soft summer air, but the slow and solemn passing-bell tolls dismally from the minster tower, and strikes on every heart with its grim reminder of mortality. Let that bell sound as often as it will, it carries always the same message, and something less or more than mortal must be the ear which can hear its direful note with indifference. Before the day is old, Redcastle has subject-matter for the talk of a year. Wonder, curiosity, and an atmosphere of excitement pervade the town. Business, if not suspended, is performed in an absent-minded, perfunctory manner. People group themselves in doorways, hang over counters, lounge in public-house bars, gather at the street corners, and there is but one name in every mouth, and that name is Trenchard.

A name worn no more upon earth—a name that is a name, and nothing more henceforward. It is no longer the docket of humanity, but a mere collection of letters to be engraven on a tombstone.

Stephen Trenchard is dead. He was found dead in his bed, at nine o'clock this morning, by the expectant bridegroom, who went to his room at that hour to wake him, and found him locked in a slumber for which earth has no key.

"Very sudden!" exclaims Redcastle. "We knew that the dear old gentleman was ailing, but we did not expect this. At his age, though, of course, life is precarious, the thread worn to attenuation, easily snapped. How about the old gentleman's will? And is Miss Faunthorpe sole heiress?"

"That will not be known till after the funeral," says Redcastle, "and we must languish for some days in suspense."

"How does Miss Faunthorpe take it?" asks Redcastle, "and Mr. Pilgrim? The match between those two will be off now, most likely. A sad loss for the gentleman, a happy escape for the lady. She will marry Sir Wilford Cardonnel after all, perhaps, and take a leading position in the county. How uncertain is life! How wonderful are the ways of Providence!"

Mrs. Stormont and Mrs. Groshen send out their pages for black-edged note-paper of superfine quality, and rather deeper than the usual complimentary mourning, and pen elaborate letters of condolence, interlarded with appropriate quotations from the Scriptures. The silver cord and the golden bowl are brought out, with various other similes, which, by much use or misuse, have been, as it were, dragged in the gutter of commonplace composition.

"I will venture to call to-morrow, my sweet friend," concludes Mrs. Stormont "to mingle my tears with yours. I hope you will feel equal to seeing me. Poor Fred is broken down with grief at the thought of what you must suffer."

Inside Lancaster Lodge there is confusion worse than death. Dr. Mitsand has been summoned to the death-chamber, not at Joel Pilgrim's bidding. What can a doctor do for the dead? Mr. Pilgrim has asked contemptuously. The best of them can do little enough for the living. It is Mrs. Skinner, the housekeeper, who has sent for Dr. Mitsand. Podmore is helpless and useless on this awful morning. He sits in his pantry stricken, as if the blow had stupefied him.

The blinds are down in Stephen Trenchard's room as they are throughout the darkened house, but Joel, who has wandered in and out of the room while the last offices have been performed for the dead, has flung the windows wide open to the warm June morning, and the scent of the roses floats in from the garden below, mingled with the more subtle perfume of blossoming limes.

Dr. Mitsand has started on his morning rounds when the messenger was sent for him, and it is noon when he calls at Lancaster Lodge.

Joel receives him in the study, grave, sorrowful of countenance, but tranquil.

"This is a sad event, Dr. Mitsand," he says.

"Not more sad than it is unintelligible, Mr. Pilgrim," answers the doctor. "There was not the slightest indication of a fatal termination to Mr. Trenchard's illness when I saw him yesterday —nothing to alarm the most anxious of medical men."

"Something wrong about the heart, I suppose," suggests Joel.

"We shall see if it was that."

"You mean——"

"I mean that this is a case which calls for an inquest. You would have no objection, I suppose? As Mr. Trenchard's son-in-law, I naturally regard you as in some manner a member of his family."

"Why should I object? But it is rather out of the usual course, is it not, to hold an inquest upon a man who has been in failing health for a long time, and whose death, although sudden, may be taken as the natural termination of his illness?"

"I beg your pardon. Death comes too soon and too suddenly to be taken as a natural termination here. I am as much surprised at Mr. Trenchard's death as if I had left him yesterday in robust health. I gave Miss Faunthorpe my positive assurance that there was no danger, or likelihood of danger in her uncle's condition. Poor young lady! The blow will be a terrible one for her. How does she bear it?"

"That is a question I cannot answer, for I have not seen her to-day. She went out this morning before breakfast—indeed, before any of the servants were up—and has not come in yet."

"That is very strange. This was to have been her wedding day."

"It was."

"And she leaves the house before the servants are up, and does not appear again? It is now between twelve and one."

"It is strange, but true."

Dr. Mitsand is evidently disturbed by this intelligence.

"Pardon me, Mr. Pilgrim, if I say something not quite agreeable to you," he says after a pause, "but was there no coercion used on the subject of this marriage? It was arranged rather suddenly, and we in Redcastle had an idea that Miss Faunthorpe's affections were engaged in another direction. When I spoke to this poor young lady the day before yesterday, I certainly perceived indications of mental disturbance. She was feverish, unduly excited, her appearance haggard, her eyes sunken. Did she freely consent to this marriage, Mr. Pilgrim? Were you and she on good terms?"

"On the best possible terms. Ask Podmore, who waited upon us at dinner yesterday when we dined *tête-à-tête*."

"Then you can imagine no reason for what I may call Miss Faunthorpe's disappearance?"

"None whatever. Her trunks are packed for our Indian journey. She directed them with her own hands. I do not say that the alliance was a love match on her part, as it was on mine. But she knew that I was devoted to her, that her uncle had set his heart upon our marriage, and she was quite reconciled to the idea."

"I am glad to hear that; for I was inclined to fear that her wandering away at such an early hour this morning might be the result of mental disturbance—the mind thrown off its balance by extreme distress. She left the house before any one knew of her uncle's death, you say?"

"She certainly left the house before I knew of it," answers Joel, gravely.

"And before it was known to any of the household?"

"Yes. She was gone when the servants went downstairs to open the house. They found the chain and bolts of the front door unfastened."

"The lodgekeeper must have let her out."

"No; she must have gone out by a door in the garden wall which opens into the lane that divides Sir John Boldero's grounds from these. The door is locked on the inside, and the key hangs on a nail beside the door. This door was found to be unlocked and the key left in the lock."

"Very deliberate," says Dr. Mitsand; "but lunatics and sleep-walkers are wonderfully deliberate in their actions. The mind travels in a certain groove, but it goes steadily enough in that groove."

The doctor's impression is that Sibyl, urged into an uncongenial marriage, has been goaded into a state of temporary derangement. That is the theory by which he explains her extraordinary absence.

"This poor girl may be wandering about the country," he exclaims, "and may come to harm. Have you made no attempt to find her?"

"No. I have had enough to think about in the awful event of this morning. Until an hour or so ago I thought it possible that Miss Faunthorpe had gone to her uncle Robert's. She might have something to say to her sisters, I thought, on so eventful a morning. It was only when Marion came here at ten o'clock, expecting to find Sibyl, that I began to take alarm. And even then my mind was too much occupied to realize——"

"I understand. I sympathize with you, my dear sir," cries the good-natured doctor. "But I feel really concerned for this poor girl. For the dead we can do but little. Science will enable us to establish the cause of death, but beyond that last duty there is, alas! nothing. But for the living we must be active. I should recommend you to send in every direction you can think of to search for Miss Faunthorpe, and to communicate with the police. With a mind thrown off its balance, one knows not what may happen. There is always the fear of a suicidal tendency."

"True," says Joel Pilgrim, with a gloomy look which may mean fear, love, anxiety, or anything else, but which certainly indicates a mind ill at ease. "I will go down to the police office at once. I will send some of the servants to look for her."

"One word before you go. Tell me how and when you discovered our poor friend's decease."

"At nine o'clock in the morning. Podmore had gone to him at four to give him his medicine, and had left him sleeping tranquilly. I came down to breakfast at eight, breakfasted alone, and at nine went upstairs to take my friend his letters, and to ask his advice about a business letter which the post had brought me. I knocked at his door—no answer; knocked again, and louder—the same result. This alarmed me at once, for I knew him to be a light sleeper. I ran downstairs to the hall, called Podmore, and went up the back stairs with him to the other door of Mr. Trenchard's room, a door always left unlocked to admit odmore, who, as you know, has valeted his master of late. We ent in, and found Mr. Trenchard lying to all appearance in a uiet sleep, but it was the sleep of death."

"No signs of a struggle, no disturbance of the features?"

"None."

"Very mysterious. There was nothing amiss with the heart; o organic disease of any kind. I have used the stethoscope equently since the bronchial tubes have been a little irritated. here never was a sounder organization."

"You would like to see him?" says Joel, interrogatively.

"Immediately."

The doctor goes upstairs to that darkened room where the aster of Lancaster Lodge takes his last rest amidst the warm reath of roses and lime-blossoms. Every chair and table has en set in its place; every fold of drapery straightened by ethodical hands; every species of litter—newspapers, medicine ottles, forgotten flowers left to wither in their vases—all the miliar rubbish of every-day existence has been cleared away— e chamber is funereal as death itself—mathematically exact as e tomb.

Dr. Mitsand goes in alone, and remains there for about ten inutes. He comes out again looking very grave—nay, even oubled, like a man who has something on his mind—something eavier than that professional burden of a patient's death which family doctor is called upon to carry so often that he acquires e knack of supporting his load easily. He finds Joel Pilgrim aiting for him on the broad landing outside—landing glorified y the bust of somebody with a sunken nose, and no pupils to is eyes, staring steadily into space.

"He looks very peaceful, doesn't he?" asks Joel, in a subdued oice.

"Very."

"His end must have been painless, I should think."

"It must have been instantaneous, Mr. Pilgrim. I am sure of at."

"The heart," suggests Joel.

"No, sir. The heart was as sound as mine—or sounder. It is ot a case of heart disease."

"Of what then?"

"The inquest will tell us that."

"You still hold to the necessity of an inquest."

"More than ever."

"Will you tell me why?" Joel inquires thoughtfully, smoothng down his silky moustache with a plump tawny hand.

"Yes, when the inquest is over."

Joel looks searchingly at the doctor's face, but it tells him othing. The Greek philosopher—Truth's first martyr—on the landing does not present a more complete blankness of expression than Dr. Mitsand offers to Joel's observation.

"Oh, by the way," says Dr. Mitsand, "that is the door of Miss Faunthorpe's sitting-room, is it not?"

"Yes. That is the room she generally uses of a morning."

"I should like to look round before we go downstairs. There might be something which would suggest the motive of her absence—a letter perhaps. You have not been in that room this morning?"

"No."

"Nor the servants?"

"Yes, some one must have been in to draw down the blinds."

"True. Unless the blinds were down last night. They would be most likely. But I suppose the housemaid would arrange the room this morning in the common course of things?"

"Naturally."

Dr. Mitsand opens the door and goes in, followed by Joel. The room has been dusted and arranged by the housemaid, but the table near the window, covered with books, workboxes and feminine trifles of various kinds, remains just as Sibyl left it the night before. It is one of Sibyl's laws that this table shall not be touched. There is to be no tidying or arranging of the trifles she values—her books, her writing materials, her fancy work.

The doctor's eye surveys the pretty little room. The sunshine is shut out by the lowered venetians, but there is light enough for him to see everything.

"I thought she might have left a letter somewhere," says Dr Mitsand. "That is what young ladies generally do when they run away from home."

"We have no right to suppose that she has run away," observes Joel.

"True. Yet it looks rather like it."

He has looked at the mantelpiece, at the cabinet with it upholsterer's collection of pink and blue Sèvres teacups, the inevitable Marie Antoinette,—the eternal De Maintenon, th everlasting Pompadour, smirking behind plate-glass panels. No there is no letter on cabinet or mantelpiece. He goes to th table, glances at the books, the dainty basket lined with rose-coloured satin, the shreds of lace, and ivory needle-cases and filigree thimble-boxes. Still no letter. How intently he examine all these trifles, peers into the basket, raises the lid of the workbox, always looking for that letter!

He comes upon something presently that engages his particula attention, but it is not a letter, only a glass phial corked an empty, nestling in the satin-lined basket among needle-cases an reels of cotton.

"Dilute prussic acid," he says, sniffing at the cork cautiously. "That's curious."

Joel watches him closely.

"Very curious," echoes Joel, "but I believe young women ometimes use it for their complexions, don't they?"

"No. I've heard of their using arsenic, never prussic acid in ny form. Miss Faunthorpe may have been taking the dilute cid as a sedative. I'll take care of the bottle. She ought not o leave such things about."

"But an empty bottle can do no harm," says Joel.

"Perhaps not, but I may as well keep it. You'll remember where we found this bottle, Mr. Pilgrim," says Dr. Mitsand, as he drops the empty phial into his pocket.

"Perhaps you will kindly call at the Registrar's and certify my poor friend's death," says Mr. Pilgrim. "Podmore tells me there is some kind of certificate necessary in these cases."

"It is just that certificate which I do not feel myself at liberty to give until after the inquest," replies the doctor.

"Why not?"

"Because I do not know the cause of death."

"But the arrangements for the funeral——"

"Must remain in abeyance till after the inquest."

"Very unpleasant," says Joel.

"Yes, death is apt to be unpleasant for the survivors, especially under certain circumstances," replies Dr. Mitsand, gravely.

He leaves Joel, and goes straight to the coroner, his old friend and ally, a medical man who has retired from practice, and the two talk together gravely of the event that has darkened the windows of Lancaster Lodge. It is decided between them that the post-mortem examination shall take place immediately, and that, if possible, Mr. Pollintory, of Krampston, shall be ready to give evidence to-morrow at the inquest. The coroner gives an order for the post-mortem examination, and Dr. Mitsand writes a telegram to Mr. Pollintory, one of the medical staff of the Krampston Infirmary, a skilled chemist and analyst, and a man of some distinction in his own particular line.

CHAPTER XLIV.

DARK SURMISES.

In the old house at the lower end of the town there is surprise and agitation, and a flutter of excitement which throws all the machinery of life out of gear. Hester leaves her dishes unwashed, and sits down in her disorderly kitchen to talk over Mr. Trenchard's death with the charwoman. They talk immensely, though they hardly know anything about the dread event, save such jetsam and flotsam of intelligence, chiefly false, as has been cast up on the shore of the High Street. But they evolve a great deal out of their inner consciousness. They speculate upon that ever-interesting subject, the will, and argue for and against Sibyl's appointment as sole heiress.

"It will be an unjust will if he's left everything to her," says Hester, vindictively.

"Ah, but she was the favourite, you see," pleads the charwoman, tilting her bonnet on to her eyebrows in her animation, "and so pretty, and such winning ways with her. I shouldn't wonder if all the money was left to her."

"Then I hope she'll remember my poor old master, and all he's done for her and her sisters," says Hester. "They might all have gone to the workhouse if it hadn't been for him. Mr. Trenchard was across the seas and couldn't help 'em, and many a good meal Dr. Faunthorpe's gone without to bring up three hearty-eating girls."

"I dare say Miss Faunthorpe will take her uncle to live with her at Lancaster Lodge," says the charwoman. "Such a lovely place! I went in one evening that there was a dinner party, to help the kitchenmaid wash up. Why, the very scullery's ekal to some people's drawring rooms!"

"Dr. Faunthorpe ain't going to live there, you may depend," replies Hester, decisively. "He don't want none of your finery. He likes his own house and his independence, and his water cake and bit of smoked bacon for breakfast."

"It's odd Miss Faunthorpe being out this morning, when her sister went up," speculates the charwoman.

"Yes, that's odd. It's my belief she was always against this Mr. Pilgrim, and her uncle had forced the marriage upon her, and she went off this morning to some of her fine friends to get out of the way. Them Cardonnels, perhaps, that she and Miss Marion was visiting at Christmas."

"Ah, they do say she might have married Sir Wilford Cardonnel if she'd liked," says the charwoman.

"Of course she could," answers Hester, glad to exalt the family she has served so faithfully. "Only she's as full of fancies as an egg's full of meat, and she wouldn't have him."

While this discussion goes on in the kitchen, Marion and Jenny sit in the parlour, occupied by all-absorbing thoughts of the dead man's will and their own mourning. They have not liked Stephen Trenchard well enough to feel any regret for his loss; nay, his death is an event to which they have looked forward as a turning-point—the beginning of brighter days—in their own ives. He is dead, and a painful interval of suspense must be ndured before they can know what he has done for them. They re hopeful meanwhile, and wildly speculative—especially Jenny, whose ideas ramble among thousands and tens of thousands as hey have never rambled before, save in the agreeable mazes of n arithmetic book.

"You see he had such oceans of money," argues Jenny. "He ould afford to make Sibyl a great heiress, and to leave us twenty housand apiece quite easily. And the interest of twenty thousand pounds is a thousand a year. Uncle Robert told me so. Fancy ou and me with a thousand a year each! No stocking-darning, no turning and twisting our winter dresses to make them do for pring. I shall go into long skirts immediately.

"That will be a boon to the rest of humanity, for they'll hide our legs," replies Marion.

"Shall you have crape tucks or flounces on your black silk?" nquires Jenny, recurring to that inexhaustible topic, the mourning.

"Whichever is the last fashion. Miss Eylett shall make our ourning, and she always has the newest style."

"But we ought to have dresses ready for the day of the uneral," says Jenny. "And how can we get them before the ill is read? We don't know whether we're heiresses or beggars."

"Carmichael's people will let us have anything we want," eplies Marion. "Depend upon it they'll give us any amount of redit now uncle Trenchard is dead. They know we must come n for some of his money."

As the day goes on the fever of curiosity and wonder which as seized upon Redcastle is intensified, for the flame is fed by ew revelations of a startling character. First there is the news f Sibyl's disappearance; and then it becomes known somehow at there is to be a post-mortem examination, followed by a roner's inquest. This is really interesting, and would distinguish e deceased from the common ruck even if he had not been a illionaire. The two local papers are in a flutter of excitement, d rival reporters hang about Lancaster Lodge and question the spectable Podmore, whose large pale face—in shape and expres-on somewhat resembling the station clock—assumes a troubled d bewildered look.

From the coroner's house Dr. Mitsand goes on to his brother actitioner, Dr. Faunthorpe. That meek little man has just turned from a long round in his dilapidated chaise, and has run in," as he calls it, to get a little bit of dinner. Regularly dine is a luxury unknown to the parish doctor. The cloth is id in the homely parlour, the remains of joint or stew are kept the oven, with a potato or two simmering in greasy gravy, d the doctor takes his repast hurriedly and alone an hour or o after the appointed dinner-hour.

He has just seated himself at his savoury mess, when Hester enters mysteriously and announces Dr. Mitsand.

"I've shown him into the best parlour," she says, whereupon Dr. Faunthorpe, faint with hunger, reluctantly lays down his knife and fork, and goes to receive his guest.

"What can he want with me?" he thinks.

Dr. Mitsand explains himself briefly.

"The coroner has ordered me to make a post-mortem examination, assisted by Mr. Pollintory—you know Pollintory, of course; and I thought you ought to be present, as a near connection of the deceased," he concludes.

"I am surprised that a post-mortem should be thought necessary," says Dr. Faunthorpe, fluttered by this intelligence. "There was nothing mysterious in my brother-in-law's death, I hope. He had been ailing for some time."

"He had; but his death was not the less unexpected. It is always best to err on the side of caution. By the way, may I ask if you use much prussic acid in your practice?"

The question startles the meek little doctor, and he looks at the inquirer with a perplexed expression of countenance.

"I have used it occasionally, but not often."

"You keep some in your surgery, no doubt?"

"Yes, I have a little of the diluted acid."

"You are careful to keep it out of harm's way, I suppose. It is not within any one's reach?" inquired Dr. Mitsand.

"I keep that and all the poisons on a top shelf, in blue bottles. They could not possibly be used in mistake for anything else, if that is what you mean."

"I am glad of that."

"But what has this to do with Mr. Trenchard's death?" asks Dr. Faunthorpe, with a troubled look.

"Only this much. From the indications presented by the body after death—a livid hue—the nails purple—the hands so firmly clenched that the women who laid out the dead have not been able to place them in a peaceful attitude—and from the odour of the room where he lies, I have too much reason to fear that Mr. Trenchard died poisoned by prussic acid. This calls for immediate investigation."

"Great Heaven, yes!" cries Dr. Faunthorpe, white with horror. "But how do you imagine the poison administered? Whom can you suspect?"

"I suspect no one as yet. The least painful supposition is that he took the poison himself."

"Why should he do that? What motive had he for committing suicide? Or what motive could any one have had fo murdering him?"

"Hard to imagine a motive in either case. Unless it wer ssible that some one who expected to profit by his death was npted to hasten that death by poison."

" Dr. Mitsand," exclaims Robert Faunthorpe, tremulous with lignant horror, "are you aware that my eldest niece is the rson who had most expectation to be a gainer by her uncle enchard's death?"

"I know that."

"And you come to ask me whether I keep any form of prussic id in my surgery—you suspect that the poison from which . Trenchard died—or by which you suppose him to have died was taken from this house?"

"I tell you that I suspect nothing, Dr. Faunthorpe. But until e law has taken this painful business into its own hands, it is y duty to act in the interests of law and right. Mr. Trenchard is in my care. He dies, as I believe, foully murdered. Your ece disappears on the day after his death."

"She runs away to escape a marriage which we may fairly ppose had been forced upon her by Mr. Trenchard."

"That is one view of the case—and I hope the right one. Yet r absence cannot fail to prejudice the minds of those who have investigate this matter. If you have any idea where she is, should recommend you to communicate with her, and urge her mediate return."

"I have no idea. She had no friends before she was adopted her rich uncle. She may have gone to some of her new ends, but they are unknown to me. I don't know where to k for her or how to communicate with her."

'It is a most unhappy case, Dr. Faunthorpe, but you and I ust do our duty."

'My poor Sibyl—my poor unhappy girl—to be the subject of h a horrible suspicion!" cries Dr. Faunthorpe, helplessly.

He sits alone for some time after Dr. Mitsand has left him, sits peless and stricken. It is not that he believes his niece guilty this hideous crime—this almost impossible wickedness.—but t the mere suspicion should have fallen upon her is a calamity t bows him to the dust.

At four o'clock that bright summer afternoon the three medical n meet at Lancaster Lodge for their dismal work. Podmore, h his large round face, still white and horror-stricken, admits m into the dusky silence of the hall. Joel Pilgrim comes out the study to receive them, very calm and business-like in nner, and leads the way to the room where the dead man lies. the door he leaves them, and goes quietly downstairs to his reat in the study, where he sits reading the paper—or making ieve to read it.

n the room upstairs the dismal work is performed in nce.

To Mr. Pollintory, the skilful analyst, it is no more than an every-day matter of business. A jar is sealed in the presence of the three medical men, and this vessel Mr. Pollintory is to take back to Krampston with him, there to perform his analysis, and apply tests scientific and physiological, in the retirement of his own laboratory.

But in the minds of those three men analysis is hardly needed to establish the one fatal fact that Stephen Trenchard has been poisoned by prussic acid. In the appearances which add to the awfulness of death, in the odour which exhales from that lifeless form, there is evidence enough of a technical kind to convince a whole college of physicians.

The doctors go quietly downstairs when their work is done and again Mr. Pilgrim appears at the study door.

"Well, gentleman?" he exclaims interrogatively, "What is your verdict? Do you find the cause of death in the heart o brain?"

"In neither," replies Dr. Mitsand.

"What then?"

"I had rather not state my opinion till I am called upon at th inquest to-morrow."

"Humph," mutters Joel. "You doctors like to be mysterious It is a trick of the trade. But pray walk in, gentlemen, you wil take some refreshment after your painful task, I hope."

Dr. Mitsand and his colleagues decline this proffered entertainment.

"I should like to ask a few questions of the butler before w go," says Dr. Mitsand. "I believe it was he who last saw M Trenchard alive."

"To the best of my knowledge it was so, answers Joel scraping his smooth chin thoughtfully. "But Podmore is a ver stupid fellow, and this sad event seems to have thrown hi quite off his balance. The man has no self-possession whateve You'll not get a succinct account from him."

"I don't want an account. I only want an answer to a question or two," replies Dr. Mitsand. "Be kind enough to rin for him, Mr. Pilgrim."

Joel obeys. Poor little Dr. Faunthorpe sits in a corner meanwhile, pale as a sheet of letter-paper, and full of vague apprehensions. That Stephen Trenchard has either destroyed himsel or been foully murdered there can be no doubt. Which is it And why is Sibyl absent?

Podmore appears in answer to the bell, and by his aspect full justifies Joel's account of him. He looks from one of th doctors to the other with a countenance full of apprehension.

"You gave Mr. Trenchard his medicine at four o'clock th morning?" inquires Dr. Mitsand.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you find him in his usual health?"

"Yes, sir."

"You noticed nothing particular in his manner?"

"No, sir—unless——"

"Speak out, pray."

"He might have been a little more irritable than usual, per-aps. He had been rather irritable for some time past. Mr. ilgrim may have noticed it."

Joel nods acquiescence.

"As if he had something on his mind?" suggests Dr. Mit-and.

"Well, yes, sir. You might take it that way."

"Who removed the glasses and bottles from Mr. Trenchard's oom this morning? Was it one of the women-servants?"

"No, sir. Mr. Pilgrim told me to see to clearing the room. The women-servants were timid about going in."

"What did you do with the glass in which your master was in he habit of taking potash water?"

"I took it down to the pantry with the rest of the things, sir, nd washed it with my other glasses."

"You are sure you washed it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you could find me that particular glass?"

"I might perhaps, sir. It was a large soda water glass. There's dozen of the same pattern in the pantry. They're kept on the ame shelf; but I think I should know the one Mr. Trenchard sed last from the position of it."

"Bring it then," says Joel, authoritatively.

Podmore shuffles out, and returns presently with the glass. Dr. Mitsand takes it to the window, and examines it with his ack to Joel and the rest.

"You wash your glasses in very hot water, I think," he says o Podmore.

"Pretty hot, sir. And I use a bit of soda to keep them right."

"I see. Was there a table with glasses and bottles on it within reach of your master's hand as he lay in bed?"

"No, sir."

"Nonsense, Podmore!" cries Joel, quickly. "You forget the ttle table which Mr. Trenchard had placed close to his bed a few ays ago, in order that he might help himself to a bottle of otash water if he wanted it without ringing for you."

"I beg your pardon, sir," stammers Podmore. "Yes, I forgot he little table; my master had it put handy to his hand, as you ay say. But it didn't use to be there, and it slipped my emory."

"And was it from that table you took this soda water glass?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do," says Dr. Mitsand, and Podmore shuffles out again, escaping gladly as a soul released from torment.

"If I could understand any motive for such an act," says Dr. Mitsand, as he and his colleagues go along the shrubberied drive between Lancaster Lodge and its gates, "I should be inclined to believe that that man poisoned his master. I never saw a more craven hound. We shall see if he comes in for an annuity, or a handsome legacy, under his master's will."

CHAPTER XLV.

IN THE SURGERY.

THAT speech of Dr. Mitsand's about Podmore awakens hope in Robert Faunthorpe's breast. If there has been murder done, if Stephen Trenchard has not been in some distracted hour his own destroyer, this man is surely more likely to have been the murderer than any one else under that roof. He has had access to his master at all hours of the night—in those silent hours when the rest of the household has been locked in sleep. He may have stolen the plate, made away with the valuables committed to his charge, and may have been tempted to make away with his master in order to escape the punishment of his dishonesty. Or he may have known himself to be a legatee under his master's will, and may have done this foul deed to expedite fortune. So Dr. Faunthorpe reasons with himself during his dismal homeward walk.

Marion and Jenny are sitting in the parlour at work when he goes in. The tea-tray still adorns the table.

"How white and tired you look, uncle!" exclaims Marion. "You'd like some tea, wouldn't you? I've saved the teapot."

"Thank you, my dear. I'll take a cup of tea," says the doctor faintly. He sinks into a chair with a weary sigh. His parish patients have been neglected to-day, and conscience pricks him. They will be coming presently, poor things, with their burns and scalds, and boils, and whitlows, and festers, and all that variety of thorns in the flesh to which poverty is subject, and he will have to brace his nerves and attend to them. But for the moment he feels prostrate.

Marion shakes the teapot vigorously, and pours out a liquid not very unlike that infusion of senna which the parish patients consume by the pailful.

"There, uncle, that 'll do you good. Run to the kitchen, Jenny, and get the hot cake we saved for uncle Robert;" and Jenny rushes off and returns swiftly with a crisp and greasy bannock, which the doctor is wont to enjoy above all other delicacies.

"Any news of Sibyl?" asks Marion.

"No, my dear," sighs the doctor.

"Strange, isn't it?" exclaims Marion.

"Very strange, my dear. I begin to feel very uneasy about your poor sister. What could have induced her to take such a step? At such a time, too!"

"Just at the time when she ought to have been thinking about her mourning," says Marion.

"I hope she hasn't committed suicide," cries Jenny, with a strangled sob.

"Jane!" exclaims the doctor, severely, "I am shocked at your suggesting anything so dreadful. Your sister is a Christian, I hope."

"Of course; but she might have been unhappy, poor thing. I dare say she detested that horrid Mr. Pilgrim, and uncle Trenchard tried to force her into marrying him, and then perhaps she got frightened and miserable, and was driven to p—p—poison herself," concludes Jenny, with a burst of sobs.

The little doctor starts in his chair as if he had been shot, and puts down his cup and saucer with a trembling hand.

"How dare you say such things, Jane?" he demands, severely. He is very angry when he calls his youngest niece Jane. "How dare you mention such a thing as poison in connection with your sister's name? Where should she get poison, I should like to know? How should she get it?"

"If—if she wanted it very badly she might get it in the surgery," whimpers Jenny.

"Not without my knowledge. I have forbidden every one in this house to touch a single bottle in my surgery."

"Yes, uncle," falters Jenny, recalling the many half-hours in which she has diverted herself with those very bottles; "but if Sibyl wanted anything very badly, some laudanum for the toothache, for instance, and you happened to be out at the time, she might not stand upon—what's its name?"

"What is the girl driving at?" cries Marion, in a disgusted tone.

"What do you mean, Jenny?" says Dr. Faunthorpe, nervously. "If there is anything in your knowledge that I ought o be told, speak out, and for God's sake speak only the truth to me, and hold your tongue to all the rest of the world about it,—

and you too, Marion. This is more serious than either of you can imagine."

"Sibyl had the toothache one afternoon when she was here—about a fortnight or three weeks ago, perhaps—or she had been having the toothache very badly, she said, and couldn't get any sleep, and she wanted some laudanum."

"Laudanum?" cries Dr. Faunthorpe, relieved. "Is that all?"

"Yes, but laudanum's poison, isn't it, uncle Robert, if you take enough of it? I told her where the laudanum was kept, and she got up on the step-ladder and took some in a little bottle out of one of your drawers. But there was one thing that struck me as very mysterious."

"What was that?"

"Does laudanum ever smell of bitter almonds?"

"No, child!" cries the doctor, with a start.

"Well, then, this did, ever so strong. The smell of it made me feel quite queer. But Sibyl declared it was laudanum, and that my smell must be all wrong."

"But you would know opium, surely, a dark brown liquid?"

"Yes, but I didn't see this. Sibyl had her back towards me while she was filling the little bottle. I only smelt it. When I asked her to show me the bottle, she refused, and called me a stupid. But I'm positive it smelt of bitter almonds; and Sibyl looked quite pale and faint afterwards, as if the smell had upset her too."

"Can this be true?" cries the doctor, profoundly agitated.

"Pray don't put yourself out of the way about it, uncle," exclaims Marion, soothingly. "Sibyl might have taken all the poisons in the surgery, and no harm need come of it. She's a great deal too fond of herself and her pretty looks to commit suicide. I dare say she's with her grand friends at the How, flirting with Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and enjoying herself ever so."

"But if she were at the How she would have heard of Mr. Trenchard's death by this time."

"I don't know about that."

"I must send to the How. I must send to every place where is a chance of finding her. It is most vital that she should return without delay."

"Yes," says Marion. "She ought to see about her mourning; and if she is to be uncle Trenchard's chief heiress it certainly looks queer for her to be out of the way at such a time."

Dr. Faunthorpe sighs and says no more. The bell rings at this moment, and he goes to his surgery to see a parish patient, who has brought the latest variety in scalds for his inspection. A whitlow drops in five minutes afterwards, followed by an interesting case of enlarged glands wrapped in flannel, after which comes a promising whooping-cough, and on the heels of that a very fair specimen of incipient measles. These occupy Dr. Faunthorpe till nine o'clock, and he has but just dismissed the measles with a comforting dose of senna when a bell rings sharply—not the surgery bell this time. He is standing in the passage when it rings, and he open the door himself, and admits a respectable-looking stranger, of business-like aspect and middle age.

"Dr. Faunthorpe, I believe?"

"Yes, I am Dr. Faunthorpe."

"Can I have a few words with you in your surgery?"

"A patient," thinks the doctor, as he ushers the visitor into his stuffy den, heated like an oven by the gas, and odorous with senna and peppermint.

"I may as well come straight to business, Dr. Faunthorpe," says the stranger directly the door is shut. "You were present at the post-mortem this afternoon, and you know that Mr. Trenchard has been poisoned with prussic acid. My name is Judbury, and I belong to the Krampston police force. I am sent here by our chief to look into this business. My duty is to find out where that prussic acid was bought. Now, before I go to the chemists' shops, Dr. Faunthorpe, I want to know if it came out of your surgery, as there is reason to suppose it did."

"What reason can there be to suppose any such thing?"

"Never you mind that. You'll be summoned to appear at the inquest to-morrow, and you'll be asked certain questions, I dare say. I want to see your bottle of dilute prussic acid."

"Suppose I tell you that I keep no such thing in my surgery?"

"Then I shall have to look for myself. I've got authority to search your surgery. You'd better let me see the bottle. It 'll come to the same thing in the end."

Very pale, and with a sinking of his heart which he has never felt before in all his patient life, Robert Faunthorpe drags the step-ladder to the recess of the fireplace, and mounts to look for the dark blue bottle.

Mr. Judbury follows him to the steps, and eyes him as a cat eyes a mouse during the operation.

Poor Dr. Faunthorpe's hand trembles a little as he takes down the fatal bottle, and before he can examine it Mr. Judbury's firm fingers have taken it from him.

"How much acid do you suppose you had in the bottle, sir?" asks Judbury.

"I really can't say to a nicety—it's a drug I rarely use—perhaps a matter of two ounces."

"And there isn't an ounce here."

"But I can't be positive," exclaims the doctor, profoundly agitated. "I tell you it's ever so long since I used any. I can't be called upon to state the quantity. It may have evaporated."

"I understand. But your impression is that you had two ounces. The bottle doesn't look as if it had been disturbed lately; the dust's pretty thick upon it," says Mr. Judbury, taking it to the gas burner and examining it closely.

"Do you see this, Dr. Faunthorpe?" he asks, pointing to the side of the dark blue bottle.

"This" is the impression of two slim fingers on the dust-whitened glass. Two streaks of blue show where two fingers have grasped the bottle.

"That's the mark of a hand, sir," says the detective decisively, "a woman's or a child's."

"Jenny, my youngest niece, may have tampered with the bottle," stammers the doctor, beside himself with fear and trouble. "She has been forbidden to touch anything, but she's a tiresome child, and may ——"

"Send for Miss Jenny, sir, and let us ask her all about it," says Mr. Judbury.

Robert Faunthorpe could have cut out his tongue for having uttered the girl's name. Jenny will come, and under this horrible man's cross-questioning will say something to implicate Sibyl. Horrors are thickening round this miserable house. Is this the hour they have all hoped and waited for, the hour which was to bring Stephen Trenchard's days to an end, and be the beginning of his kindred's prosperity?

Seeing the doctor hesitate, Mr. Judbury makes bold to ring the bell for himself. It is answered by Hester, looking daggers. She hates to be disturbed at her supper. It may be only bread and cheese, or the scrapings of some bone or pie dish, or the greasy remnants of hashed mutton, washed down with a mug of table beer, but she likes to eat her meal in peace.

"What is it, sir?" she asks, snappishly.

"Send Miss Jane here," falters the doctor.

Jane comes and is questioned about the blue bottle. She fences with her questioner at first, and looks as if the rack itself would not twist an admission of any kind out of her; but subjected to Mr. Judbury's insidious process of interrogation, she finally tells the whole story of Sibyl's coming into the surgery to get some laudanum, and the mysterious smell of bitter almonds, and the bottle which Sibyl filled and would not let her see.

"Thank you, miss," says Judbury, approvingly. "I think we must get you to appear before the coroner to-morrow."

"Jane," exclaims the doctor when Mr. Judbury had made his bow and departed, "you have put a rope round your sister's neck."

CHAPTER XLVI.

STEPHEN TRENCHARD SURPRISES HIS FRIENDS.

REDCASTLE is profoundly excited next morning by the inquest which is held in the large room—a ball-room or a dining-hall on festive occasions—at the "Coach and Horses" Hotel. Whispers of foul play have floated in the air since the *post-mortem* examination at Lancaster Lodge. Sibyl's disappearance has become known, and people look at one another ominously as they mention her name. Mr. Pilgrim's behaviour in this time of trial is the admiration of everybody, the enthusiasm beginning with the firm of upholsterers and undertakers whom he entrusts with the conduct of Mr. Trenchard's obsequies, and gradually permeating the town till every one is loud in his praise. His coolness, his clearness of head, his decent grief for his departed friend, his thoughtful consideration for Sibyl, in quest of whom he has sent far and wide,—all these things entitle him to the admiration of the town, and Redcastle does not stint its praise.

Never has the coroner sat in so crowded a court as this which he gravely contemplates to-day. Mrs. Stormont has borrowed her cook's bonnet, and put on her thickest veil, fondly feeling herself disguised by these means, when every turn of her head and every angle of her figure are as well known in Redcastle as the town pump. Mrs. Groshen is also present and thickly veiled. The two matrons have been accommodated with chairs in a quiet corner near the reporters' table, and they put their heads together, and sigh dismally, and talk of the awfulness of life and death, and the mysterious depths of wickedness in the human heart, pending the commencement of the proceedings.

The first evidence is entirely medical. Dr. Mitsand describes those appearances in the corpse which led him to conclude that Stephen Trenchard had been poisoned. Mr. Pollintory deposes to the finding of the poison in his analysis of the contents of the stomach. Dr. Mitsand describes the discovery of a phial which has contained the diluted acid in a basket in the room usually occupied by Sibyl Faunthorpe.

Joel Pilgrim is examined as to the discovery of the death at nine o'clock on the previous morning. He is questioned as to those appearances which at once impressed Dr. Mitsand, and he owns that in the agitation consequent on the sad event he had overlooked these indications.

"You saw nothing particular in the appearance of the corpse?" inquires the coroner.

"I was too agitated to observe."

"Yet you must have perceived the livid hue which struck Dr. Mitsand."

"I may have perceived that. My impression was that death had been caused by an apoplectic stroke."

"And that, in your mind, would account for the livid tinge?"

"It would."

"Did you observe the eyes?"

"I was too agitated to observe details."

"But you must have seen the expression of the eyes. Were they bright and glassy—staring—the pupils dilated?"

"I cannot say. I sent for the women to lay out the corpse immediately. The whole thing was too painful, too sudden, to allow of my observing particulars."

He is questioned as to Sibyl's disappearance.

"Can you give any reason for the young lady being absent at such a time?"

"I cannot."

"She was to have been married to you yesterday morning?"

"She was."

"Had she given her free consent to the marriage?"

"She had."

"I beg your pardon," interposes a gentleman sitting at the table. "I think these questions are quite irrelevant to the object of the inquest. The jury have only to determine the cause of death. Miss Faunthorpe's conduct is outside the question."

Robert Faunthorpe has engaged a Krampston solicitor to watch the proceedings in his niece's interest. He has done his utmost for her in this, having an idea that the genius of Krampston is infinitely superior to that of Redcastle, and that a Krampston lawyer must be a man of much experience and acumen.

Podmore, the butler, is examined as to his last visit to his master's room, and the state in which he left the deceased. His answers to the coroner's questions closely resemble those he made to Dr. Mitsand yesterday afternoon, but there is a thickness in his speech which offends that functionary.

"That will do, sir. This is very shameful, sir, positively disgusting. You are intoxicated."

"I beg your pardon, sir," falters Podmore, dissolving in tears. "You blas' my ch—ck—ar—racter, sir. I haven't touched—drop—spiriss this morr'ng. It's my feelings."

"Go away, sir. You are drunk. I won't hear another word."

Dr. Faunthorpe is now examined as to the abstraction of a portion of prussic acid contained in the bottle in his surgery, but the coroner can obtain no positive statement from him as to the quantity which ought to have been in the bottle.

"Come, Dr. Faunthorpe, you must have some approximate idea as to the quantity of acid in your possession. Your books would show you when you last bought any. If your memory is so much at fault we shall have to ask to see your books."

"It is three years at least since I bought any. I may not have kept the wholesale chemist's bill. I have no record."

"Oh, come, you must remember something about it. If you so rarely employ the acid in your medicines you must have the quantity you purchased nearly intact. Now what is the smallest quantity you have ever bought?"

"I think, about two ounces."

"You have never bought above two ounces?"

"I do not think so."

"Come, Dr. Faunthorpe, you are too scientific a man to think about a fact. You must know."

And finally the coroner wrings from the reluctant witness the admission that he ordered two ounces of the diluted acid with other drugs three years ago. That he used it once as a sedative in a case of violent sickness, that he cannot remember having used it since. He admits the finding of a bottle in his surgery last night, with only one ounce or less than one ounce of the poison. The bottle is now in the possession of the authorities.

The Krampston solicitor objects to these questions, as having no bearing on the main issue, which is simply to ascertain the cause of death, but his objections are not entertained. The coroner of Redcastle conducts his inquest with a lofty hand, and is as arbitrary as any of his mediæval predecessors.

Jane Faunthorpe is not called, much to the doctor's relief. Yet he feels that even as matters stand there is a dark cloud hanging over the head of the absent Sibyl.

"Perhaps it would be better for her never to return," he thinks.

He has sent a messenger to The How, and has sent in other directions without avail. He can discover no trace of Sibyl. Yet Mr. Judbury is already in possession of some information upon this subject. He knows the hour at which she left Redcastle, the train by which she went, the clothes she wore, the bag she carried. His next duty will be to discover whither she has gone.

The jury go to Lancaster Lodge to view the body. The medical evidence having settled the cause of death, this is little more than a formula, which it is indeed in many cases where investigation should be thorough, After this, although the cause of death is sufficiently clear, the coroner suggests the adjournment of the inquiry until further evidence can be brought forward.

There is some little discussion between the coroner and one of the jury as to a convenient date for the adjourned inquiry, and Mr. Judbury, who has been present throughout the proceedings, has a few words to say upon this subject. Finally the inquest is adjourned to this day week. The funeral arrangements meanwhile may proceed.

"And the will may be read," thinks Dr. Faunthorpe, "and we shall know if Sibyl is the heiress. God grant she may appear without delay, and make her innocence manifest to every one."

He goes back to his daily round of duty sorely dejected in spirit. There is none of his parish patients, hard as may be their struggle for existence, who carries so heavy a heart this day as he who ministers to their wants. There is no rheumatism or sciatica that gripes its victim with a sharper pang than the agony which tears Robert Faunthorpe's breast when he thinks that in the minds of all his townsfolk Sibyl lies under suspicion of murder.

Meanwhile Messrs. Kabriole, the upholsterers and undertakers, are in their glory. The massive oaken coffin, glittering with brazen furniture, is in hand,—merrily rings the joiner's hammer on the stout oak. The best velvet pall is brought forth from its resting-place, aired and brushed. The big Flemish horses have their manes combed and their fetlocks clipped, and receive all the embellishment that skilful grooming can bestow. The sable plumes are shaken out, the inky cloaks unfolded, and there is quite an agreeable excitement in Messrs. Kabriole's back shop.

"I shan't be sorry to get our account in," says Kabriole the elder to his Son and Co. "There's a heavy amount outstanding. Mr. Trenchard was like many of your millionaires, slow in parting with his money."

"I should have asked him for it, father, if I was you," suggests the son.

"Yes, and have lost a first-rate customer," replies the senior, severely. "Gentlemen in that position mustn't be pressed for money. The most one can do is to send in one's account at Christmas."

"You might have said you had a bill to make up, or something."

"I does that with my pettifogging customers, Joe, never with a man of Mr. Trenchard's standing. It's too 'ollow."

"Well, the money will come handy in a lump," remarks the son.

"Of course it will, Joe; and you must bear in mind that I charges five per cent. interest all along—and the interest gets posted up every quarter, and carries interest on the back of it. It's like putting one's money in the bank—and safer."

"Well, you're a good 'un, father. There's no getting the right side of you."

"I've got an 'ed for business, Joe," answers the parent, complacently. "I was born so."

The days go by, but bring no tidings of Sibyl. The day of the funeral comes, a quiet funeral, but splendid. All that wealth can do to disguise the awfulness of death—or to add to it—with funeral pomp, has been done here. Mr. Kabriole watches the sable train leave his premises with a thrill of pride. Every item of that gorgeous *cortége* is already entered in his ledger. He feels that the metropolis could hardly beat this display.

"Drat your reformed funerals—with their rubbishing open cars, reminding folks of Lord Mayor's Day, or Ashley's Theayter!" exclaims the upholsterer, who has served his time to a London firm. "Give me the good old style—the legitimate, as your playgoers say of the draymer."

Dr. Faunthorpe, Mr. Pilgrim, Dr. Mitsand, and Colonel Stormont are the only mourners, and occupy two mourning coaches. Poor Dr. Faunthorpe weeps silently behind his handkerchief—not for the dead, for whom he cares but little, but for the living, over whom clouds lower so heavily. He feels very much as if he were going in solemn state to his own execution. Except these tears there is but little show of grief. Dr. Mitsand and Colonel Stormont talk of the mystery of the dead man's end, but do not commit themselves to any opinion on the subject. Joel Pilgrim is silent as death itself.

A good many private carriages testify to the respect in which Stephen Trenchard has been held by his fellow-townsmen. Sir Wilford Cardonnel's family chariot follows with high stepp'ng bays, and the coachman and footman in their last new liveries.

Solemnly tolls the minster bell as the procession wends its slow and pompous way down the street. Shutters are up before almost all the shop windows—blinds are down in many places—a respectful crowd gazes in reverential silence at the spectacle.

The town of Redcastle bears witness that it has lost a benefactor.

However solemnly performed, that service of the Church which remits dust to dust is not a long one, nor is Stephen Trenchard's funeral protracted by any desperate burst of grief from the mourners. Decently, reverently, are all ceremonies performed. The mourners linger for a moment or so looking down at the coffin, rather as if they expected to see the departed spread his wings and soar visibly to a better world. Finding his ashes quiescent they sigh, shake their heads despondently, and move away, scrape the clay off their boots upon an adjacent plebeian tombstone, and walk slowly back to their carriages.

"Now for the will," says Colonel Stormont, cheerily, as they drive away from the churchyard.

There is something of the nature of a lottery in that will. There may be small prizes even for outsiders. Mourning rings, silver tankards, lapis-lazuli snuff-boxes, carved ivory, or other spoil of Ind.

"Most mysterious disappearance of that girl," exclaims the colonel, after a pause. "What motive could she have for running away, unless——"

"Unless she had poisoned her uncle," says Dr. Mitsand, interpreting the colonel's awful look. "If she were guilty of that crime I think she would be here to-day. If she were capable of such an act she would be capable of holding her ground afterwards."

"They can't always stand it, you know," argues Colonel Stormont, speaking of the murderous profession generally. "They lose their heads and bolt after the thing is done. I suppose it looks so much worse to them when it is done than it did from the other side. They are a pluckless set for the most part, I think."

"It was not in that girl to commit a murder,' says Dr. Mitsand, with conviction. "The circumstantial evidence is strong against her, I admit—her disappearance—the poison taken from her uncle's surgery—her expectation of Mr. Trenchard's fortune. But if she had poisoned him in order to get possession of his money, it stands to reason she would have stayed to receive her inheritance. She would have known that to fly was almost to admit her guilt."

"She may have been seized with a panic when the thing was done."

"She would have stayed, colonel," persists the doctor. "She might have been stricken with fear, but she would have held her ground. She is too clever to commit such a blunder as flight if she had been guilty."

"How do you account for her absence, then?"

"Easily enough. Her uncle was forcing her into a hateful marriage, and she had not moral courage enough to oppose her will to his, so she let matters go on to the very last, and then ran away. A foolish thing to do, no doubt, but human."

"But why should she have taken that prussic acid from her uncle's surgery, as it is pretty evident she did take it, though the fact hasn't come out yet?"

"She may have armed herself with that as the means of suicide—a last resource if all other modes of escape failed her. We have no evidence that the prussic acid which killed Stephen

Trenchard was the poison taken from Dr. Faunthorpe's surgery."

"You have the evidence of the empty bottle?"

"She may have thrown the stuff away, fearing to keep anything so dangerous in her possession. If she were guilty, she would hardly have left that bottle in her work-basket."

"Humph," mutters the colonel. "You take an indulgent view of the case."

"I admit that at the first I was staggered by the facts, and inclined to suspect Miss Faunthorpe; but reflection has led me to form another opinion."

"Gad, sir, and I should be glad if I could believe her innocent," says the colonel, energetically. "She has eaten my bread and salt; I have liked and admired her; and even"—with ineffable condescension—"thought of her as a wife for my eldest son. I believe that poor boy adores her. It would be horrid to think her guilty. But these proceedings ought to be looked straight in the face, Dr. Mitsand, if we don't want the whole fabric of society shaken. We mustn't be prussic-acid-ed into our graves in a quiet little town like this, and the prisoner go scot free. No, sir; I wish the good old law for the punishment of prisoners was still in force. We want our *Chambre Ardente*, sir, for these scoundrels."

They are at the gates of Lancaster Lodge by this time. The mourning coaches drive up to the hall door, where stands Podmore, quite sober on this occasion, and fully awake to the dignity of his position. He ushers the mourners to the drawing-room, where the sunlight is subdued by half-closed venetian shutters, through which shines the sunny vista of lawn and flower-beds. The crimson satin couches and ottomans are ranged in solemn order. A silver tray of decanters and glasses is placed unobtrusively on a side table. There is a small writing-table in front of an open window, with a chair set beside it, evidently prepared for the family lawyer, thinks Colonel Stormont, as he takes a glass of old Madeira from the obsequious Podmore.

No family lawyer appears, however. The four gentlemen refresh themselves gravely at the side table, assisted by Podmore. Very bitter is the taste of the Amontillado to Dr. Faunthorpe, but his parched lips need to be moistened in some wise. The moment is at hand when the dealings of the dead to the living will be known. Will justice have been done to all his nieces, or will favours be heaped upon that one of them whom in secret he, Robert Faunthorpe, has loved the best?

Joel Pilgrim takes a second glass of sherry, clears his throat, and goes to the little table by the window.

"I believe, gentlemen," he begins, and the three mourners turn towards him, full of eager curiosity, "that in cases where there is a will to be read this is about the time at which the ceremonial is gone through. Now my good friends Stephen Trenchard has left no will."

There is a look of amazement in the countenances of his three hearers. Dr. Faunthorpe feels the room going round bewilderingly, and tries feebly to remember how the law of inheritance stands in the case of nieces whose uncle dies intestate.

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Trenchard, a man of business, has died intestate?" exclaims Colonel Stormont, with indignant incredulity.

"He has died intestate for the best of all reasons," answers Joel, coolly, as he unlocks a drawer in the writing-table. He had nothing to bequeath!"

"Come, sir, you are laughing at us," cries the colonel.

"He was too sincere to indulge in the mockery of a will, and, in that self-restraint, was a model to mankind in general, who seem to take delight in disposing of imaginary effects," replies Joel, in an easy conversational tone. "He made no will, but during his late illness he entrusted me with a little paper which it was his wish that I should read to any of his friends and relatives who should be present on this sad occasion. With your permission, gentlemen, I shall proceed to do so."

"Make haste about it, sir," cries the colonel. "I can see that we have all been outrageously humbugged."

"You are not the first, colonel, who has taken the appearance for the reality," replies Joel, politely.

He unfolds a sheet of letter-paper covered with Stephen Trenchard's neat penmanship, and reads thus:—

"Having reason to believe that I may die insolvent, I refrain from the empty formula of a last will and testament. I have nothing to bequeath except those accommodation bills drawn upon Providence, which good men call blessings.

"The business which I conducted for thirty years in India was on the verge of insolvency when I retired from it, though the house of Trenchard and Co. stood high in the opinion of the commercial world, and its paper was as easily negotiated as that of the Bank of England. I had sunk my capital in the business, and I consider that I was guilty of no fraud in withdrawing from it about a third of the amount of that original capital, although I knew that in so doing I must precipitate the ultimate failure. I transferred my speculative trade to a man adroit enough to navigate the leaky vessel for a few more voyages upon the commercial sea, and I was enabled to make my retreat from India with ten thousand pounds and high repute; for, although I was known to have been engaged in some doubtful adventures, and to have been somewhat unscrupulous in my traffic, I was believed to be enormously rich.

"I was sixty-six years of age when I made up my mind to retire from the excitements and agitations of a hazardous trade, and to enjoy the lotus-eater's calm repose for the rest of my days. I calculated that the ten thousand pounds that I was able to draw would, with a judicious use of my credit, last out my life, and enable me to glide in comfort to the grave. It pleased me to return to that native town which I had left as a penniless lad, and which, when I was honest and industrious, refused me daily bread. With a few thousands at my banker's, and the reputation of unlimited resources, I was able to command all that the town could give. Redcastle laid its riches at my feet. I had but to pay the rent of my house, the wages of my servants, and to give a cheque on account now and then to my tradespeople. Every year left me a little deeper in their debt.

"I fear that I may have excited false hope in the mind of my very dear niece, Sibyl Faunthorpe. I regret the possibility of this, but I cannot be blamed for any baseless ideas which she may have entertained on the subject of my supposed fortune. I have never made any statement calculated to mislead her. I have neither directly nor indirectly fostered expectations of an inheritance from me. My dear Sibyl has been the companion and solace of my retirement, and she has enjoyed all those luxuries and comforts with which I have smoothed the pathway of my declining years. Should there be any balance, or residue of the money now in my banker's hands, at the time of my death, after the payment of my just debts, I hereby give the same to my friend and successor in commerce, Joel Pilgrim; but as I apprehend that my moneys in hand will hardly suffice to pay my outstanding accounts, I have not taken the trouble to put this bequest in the form of a will.

"STEPHEN TRENCHARD,

"May 20th, 187—."

CHAPTER XLVII.

"IT IS NOT NOW AS IT HAS BEEN OF YORE."

ALEXIS goes to Dorley Mill a few days after his interview with Mr. Scrodgers the lawyer, and tells Linda Challice all that the man of law has said in relation to Trot, and the advisability of that young gentleman's being domiciled at the Grange.

"You see I want to establish the fact of his being my son," says Alexis. "People will hardly believe in my paternity while the little fellow is here. He ought to live with me—he ought to be seen in my company. A few years hence it won't so much matter where he may live. His name and position will be settled."

"I understand," says Linda, sadly. "Yesterday you gave me a promise which made me very happy; to-day you take it back again."

"Linda, forgive me," cries Alexis, deeply distressed. "If you knew how it grieves me to rob you of your darling! But it is for his good. Why cannot we three be happy as we have been together? The sweetest days of my life were those I spent under this dear roof—with him—with you. Why cannot those happy days come again, Linda? My love, my darling, what is the world worth that it should part us?"

His arm is round her, he draws her to his breast, looking down into those beseeching agonized eyes, which meet his in silent reproach that pierces deeper than words. For one passionate moment he has forgotten the fetters that hold him to another, forgotten everything except that this girl has grown inexpressibly dear to him.

She releases herself from his arm, and he stands before her with shame-bowed head, conscience-stricken.

"Forgive me, Linda," he pleads. "I was thinking of what might have been. No, I will not be such a wretch as to rob you of Trot—not yet awhile, at any rate. What can I give him to replace his adopted mother's fond care? You shall keep him, Linda."

"Not if it is for his interest to be with you," Linda answers gravely. "But you need not be in a hurry to take him from me. A few days—a few weeks even—can make little difference. Give me time to get accustomed to the idea of parting with him."

"So be it. And you will let me come here very often and see him, so that he may grow fonder of me, and come to look upon me as his father?"

"No," she answers, with downcast eyes. "Let me have him quite to myself for this time. He loves you already, you have no need to win his affection. Let me have him all to myself, and when the day comes claim him from me, and I will give him to you without a tear."

Alexis understands the motive of this denial, and feels that he has merited to be thus denied.

"You have only to command me, Miss Challice," he says, "and remember that this boy will be no son of mine if his affection for you, or his remembrance of your goodness, is ever lessened."

"He is so young," replies Linda, with a sigh. "He will have so much time in which to forget."

And then they part with a friendly shake hands, and a little commonplace talk about old Mr. Benfield and the mill, and both try to forget, or seem to forget, that fatal betrayal of feeling on the part of Alexis; and when he has gone Linda creeps up to her room,—the pretty girlish chamber, with its white draperies and water colour sketches, Linda's own work, on the paneled walls—and kneels beside the little white bed, and sobs as if her heart were broken. Happily, her life of simple duty affords little leisure for the indulgence of grief, and she is obliged to bathe her swollen eyelids presently and to go downstairs to see about Trot's custard pudding, which delicacy, made with a new-laid egg, and baked in a saucer, no other hands can be permitted to prepare. Trot's sharp eyes discover the traces of tears in those heavy eyelids.

"What for you cry, mammie?" he demands. "You not been naughty, has you?"

Tears and naughtiness go together in Trot's mind.

"I hope not, love."

"And you not tumbled down 'tairs."

"No, darling."

"Den oo got nosing to cry for," says Trot, decisively.

It is with the deepest shame that Alexis remembers that unhappy outbreak of his. This is how he has pleaded his friend's cause. This is his allegiance to Dick Plowden. He can hardly look that faithful friend in the face without blushing, when he gets back to the Grange.

"Did you see her?" asks Dick.

"Oh yes, I saw her."

"And was she looking well?"

"A little pale and worried, I thought. She doesn't like parting with Trot, you see."

"No, of course not."

Alexis goes to London that afternoon and procures a copy of the entry of his marriage in the register at the little Gothic church in the Pimlico district, so memorable to Sibyl and to him; the church they entered so hopefully that bleak March morning, four years ago, careless of the future, confident of happiness, and knowing little more of life's actualities than if they had been the prince and princess of a fairy tale. In that stony labyrinth of Pimlico Alexis is within an easy walk of Dixon Street, Chelsea. He goes by ways that were painfully familiar to him in the days of his poverty. He seems to know every shop-front in this water-side street, every stone, every housetop, and chimney-stack, and street corner. He leaves the prim dwelling-places of middle-class respectability, and enters poverty's Bohemia. There flows the river beyond its muddy margin, rosy in the evening sun.

How the scene brings back the bygone time, the heart-sinking and despair, the dread of to-morrow, the vain hope, the crushing disappointment! There is little use, perhaps, in this visit to his old quarters. His will is made, his son's heritage is rendered as secure as the law of the land can make it; there is little fear, one would suppose, of the boy's parentage being called into question in the time to come; but Alexis has a fancy for seeing the house which sheltered his poverty and care, which was home in the days when he thought himself secure of his wife's love. Here is the dingy old street, more dingy and dismal in the warm summer twilight than in wintry obscurity. How sorely all the doors and window-sashes want painting! what wisps of dirty straw and ragged scraps of paper have drifted to this quiet haven from the busier ways outside. Odd curtains drape the parlour windows, grimy blinds droop hopelessly on their slackened lines, like sails in a dead calm. Here and there a few flower-pots testify to the love of the beautiful in some struggling denizen; in one area there is a family of rabbits, in another a collection of poultry; in a third a cobbler has built his wooden workshop. If it were possible for anything already so debased to sink a little lower, Alexis would think that Dixon Street has gone down since he last beheld it. But the effect lies doubtless rather in his own eye, which is a stranger to the place.

Mrs. Bonny has been endowed with an orderly mind, and it has been her constant struggle to raise her dwelling-place above the Dixon Street level. She has eschewed rabbits and poultry. Her parlour windows are shaded by clean though faded chintz, and display the healthiest geraniums in the street. Her door-steps are hearthstoned daily, and it grieveth her to the heart when the ruthless feet of her lodgers or their following sully the purity of the stone. It must be confessed that this aspiration after the beautiful, this struggle to maintain cleanliness in a neighbourhood where blacks fall as the rain from heaven, has exercised a deteriorating influence upon Mrs. Bonny's temper. The native sweetness of that overworked woman's disposition has been turned to sour by the perpetual falling of smuts, the frequent passage of muddy soles across newly-hearthstoned steps, the reckless disregard of scrapers and door-mats, which is idiosyncratic of the lodger family. When she opens her door to a stranger, Mrs. Bonny looks not at his face, but directs a furtive and angry glance at his boots, and follows his progress into her house with a smothered murmur of dissatisfaction. Her life is an endless warfare, which her constancy of spirit would render absolutely noble, were the enemy wherewith she striveth a trifle more exalted; but to fret and fume about the soiling of a door-step, to be miserable because a dirty boot sullieth one's stair carpet, hath in it something of pettishness and folly; and these small and sordid cares have impressed themselves upon Mrs. Bonny's visage—they have drawn down the angles of her mouth, and written a network of wrinkles upon her brow.

She opens the door to Alexis this evening. The rosy light on the river is deepening to a crimson glow; the sky grows faint and opal-tinted; and a young moon, which has been showing pale all the afternoon, begins to brighten in the eastern gray. Alexis had been prepared to observe some surprise in his landlady's countenance at this sudden reappearance of his, after a lapse of three years and a half, but to his astonishment she receives him with perfect tranquillity of countenance, save for an anxious downward glance at his boots, a look which he remembers of old.

"I thought as much," she mutters. "You can walk upstairs, Mr. Stanmore."

Stanmore was the adopted name of his poverty.

"I have called for a little chat with you, Mrs. Bonny, if you can spare time," he begins politely, remembering that his old landlady, like the Fates, was a goddess who needed a good deal of propitiation.

"I ain't got the time now," replies Mrs. Bonny, snappishly, "for I was cooking my parlour's supper when you rang, and I dare say it'll have stuck to the bottom of the frying-pan when I get back. You can walk upstairs, can't you? You know your way, I should think."

"To the front room?" inquires Alexis.

"Yes, of course. It happened to be empty when the young woman called about it—not as I'm ever long empty, thank Providence. It ain't much reward to get for slaving from morning till night, gracious knows. Wipe your boots, if you please, Mr. Stanmore. There's a mat at the foot of the stairs."

The master of Cheswold Grange does not quite understand the drift of these remarks, but he obeys as meekly as the penniless waiter upon fortune was wont to do in days gone by. Mrs. Bonny hurries back to her frying-pan, and Alexis goes up the well-remembered staircase, with its papered wall representing a bewildering multiplication of Gothic archways of a dingy brown hue, its narrow window with a gaudy painted blind of ecclesiastical design, its heavy old balusters, the remains of better days, when Dixon Street was the abode of polite society, and fine gentlemen and ladies may have roystered and gambled in these old rooms after an evening at Ranelagh.

Twilight has thickened, and Mrs. Bonny's staircase is wrapped in shadow when Alexis opens the door of that one room which was once his home—a single chamber which would then have been deemed all-sufficient as a home could he but have found the wherewithal to pay the rent thereof. How well he remembers that miserable home-coming, when, like Byron, he found his hearth deserted and his household gods shattered. The memory saddens him. He forgets his newly-found son—forgets the business that has brought him to Dixon Street. The picture of that bitter day comes back, and shuts out every other image.

The room looks as if not one article of its furniture had been removed or altered since he saw it last. There stands the scarlet tea-tray on the table against the wall—there the tea-caddy—there the leather-bound family Bible. There are the old chintz-covered arm-chairs, the tent bedstead, the trumpery crockery images—awkward caricatures of old Chelsea ware—on the high narrow mantelpiece; and yonder, seated on the well-remembered sofa, in a despondent attitude, with hands clasped listlessly and drooping head, appears a figure at sight of which Alexis Secretan recoils as if he had seen a ghost.

He may well be startled, for this figure is the image of his wife as he has seen her on many an evening, at his home-coming, when she has grown weary of waiting for his return, and has sunk into despondency.

For a moment his blood freezes, and he feels as if a spirit were there; but in the next instant a cry of surprise breaks from his lips, "Sibyl, can it be you?"

She starts up from the sofa, looks at him in bewilderment, and then throws herself upon his breast.

"Alex, my best, my dearest, my only protector and comfort," she cries, "how did you know—who told you that I was here?"

He puts her away from him gently but firmly. The thought of her falsehood about his son's death comes between him and his wife; and it may be that love for her, as he has often told himself, has died out of his heart, murdered by her unkindness. There is something else too, perhaps, in this moment that comes between him and the pale face lying on his breast. The image of a sweeter and less selfish woman, whose eyes looked up at him full of grief and pain a few hours ago.

"Alex, how unkind you are, and how coldly you look at me! But you came here in search of me, did you not? You are not living here?"

"No, Sibyl, I am not living here, and I did not come here to look for you. How was I to suppose that I should find you here when I left you at Redcastle in the house of Stephen Trenchard? I did not think you would come to such a place as this of your own election."

"It was the only place I could think of as a refuge, Alex. I knew that I should be safe with Mrs. Bonny, and I knew of no other lodgings in London. Perhaps, too, I had a fancy for coming back here. It was like returning to the past—to the days when you loved me."

She says this shyly, standing before her husband with downcast eyes, like a child who has offended and anticipates reproof.

There is all the old innocence of manner, the almost childlike sweetness which charmed Alexis when he first saw Sibyl Faunthorpe in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, but there is a chilled and deadened feeling at his heart, as of love that has fallen asleep and can wake no more, or love that has been stricken dumb, and can find its old familiar speech never again.

"Say rather the days in which I thought you worthy to be loved," he replies, gravely. "You made your election when you left this room. You cannot undo it by returning here, whatever may be the caprice that moves you. When you chose to be your uncle Trenchard's toady instead of my wife, you cancelled the bond between you and me. I gave you the option of renewing that old bond, but, having your sordid aim in view, and fancying yourself on the threshold of success, you refused my offer. That made an end of our union for ever. There is no legal process, no decree of the Divorce Court, which could separate us more utterly than we are parted now."

"Alex," she cries piteously, "you did once love me. How can you be so unforgiving?"

"I'll tell you how and why. When we last met and parted I asked you a question, a question that involved the happiness of my manhood and the hope of my age. You answered me with a deliberate lie."

"I don't remember," falters Sibyl, deeply humiliated. She had thought it so easy a manner to reclaim this faithful heart. In her darkest hour she had always counted upon her husband's love as a certainty, a treasure inalienable, despite her sins against him, thinking of him somewhat after the manner in which man is apt to think of God's mercy and forgiveness, as an inexhaustible fund, upon which he can draw as largely as he likes, with no fear of having his bills returned.

"You dont remember that when I asked for my son you told me he was dead,—looked me calmly in the face, and told me black and bitter lie. He had only survived his birth by a few days, you said. All the hopes I had built upon his existence were baseless and delusive. You made me believe this, Sibyl."

She looks at him intently in the twilight, with a look that is half terror, half wonder.

"Why should you imagine that I was deceiving you when I told you of your son's death?" she asks.

"For the best possible reason. I have found my son."

"What? You have been to Dorley Mill?"

"I have been to the place where you left your child, left him, glad to be released from a tie which most women hold sacred; left him to play your part at the feet of Stephen Trenchard, to pass for a spinster, and captivate country gentlemen, and angle for a fortune. You have won your game I hope after making such sacrifices,—if it can be called a sacrifice to have abandoned husband and child. Stephen Trenchard is dead, I suppose, and you have inherited his fortune, or you would hardly have deserted your post, even for the sentimental pleasure of revisiting the scene of your married life."

"My uncle Stephen is not dead. I have inherited nothing. I stand before you a pauper, Alex, bankrupt in everything; even in hope, since you have ceased to love me."

"Your uncle not dead! You have voluntarily abandoned your chance of being his heiress? You must have changed greatly since that night when you and I talked together in Mr. Trenchard's house?"

I was surrounded with difficulties, Alexis. I should have held my ground to the very last;—yes, call me mercenary, despise me if you will, I will not shrink from the truth;—I would have stopped with my uncle till the day of his death if he had not made that impossible by his tyranny."

She tells Alexis the story of the last few months how she had been urged to marry Joel Pilgrim, and how when matters grew desperate she had taken flight.

"I wrote to that good girl, Jane Dimond, and asked her to find me a lodging, here if possible. Luckily for me this room was empty, and I came straight from the railway station here."

"A disappointing end to your schemes and hopes," says Alexis, still unpitying. He cannot easily forgive that heartless falsehood about his boy. His wrongs as a husband he might pardon. The injury done him as a father rankles deeper.

"It is a sorry end, Alexis, humiliating, shameful. For upwards of three years I have been my uncle's patient companion. I have borne all his caprices, devoted myself to the task of making his life pleasant to him. He has been very good to me. I should be wickedly ungrateful if I were to deny or to forget that. I think, too, that he loved me in his undemonstrative manner; and if I was deceived in believing that he would make me his heiress, everybody else in Redcastle laboured under the same delusion. But this Mr. Pilgrim's influence upon him is stronger than mine. I do not believe that my uncle really wished me to marry that man, or even that Joel Pilgrim's presence in his house made him happy; but there was an influence of some kind—an influence which I could never understand—exercised by that East Indian upon my uncle Stephen."

"I congratulate you upon having escaped that unholy house," says Alexis. "I am glad you did not carry your subservience to your uncle so far as to marry the East Indian. I am very glad you drew the line at that."

"Had I been as free as my uncle thought me I should have done the same," replies Sibyl.

"And may I ask what plan of existence you have formed to replace your blighted hopes?" says Alexis. "I suppose after this rebellious flight of yours there is no chance of your inheriting your uncle's fortune."

"I gave up every idea of that when I left his house. As for a plan of life, I have none. The only hope I had has left me. I have a little ready money, and a few trinkets which I can convert into money. This will carry me on till I can get a situation as a governess—if that is to be done without a friend to speak for my character. I have not neglected my education during the last three years, and I can fall back upon the old drudgery."

She says all this despondently. Hope has died within her breast. She had thought it so easy a thing to cancel the past, and now it seems to her that she and Alexis Secretan are as far apart as if they had never loved each other, never sworn life-long fidelity, never spent their careless honeymoon together under the young leafage in the Bois de Boulogne, among St. Germain's forest walks, and on the lamplit Boulevards, with all the joyous life of Europe's gayest city drifting by them like a stream of folly—never suffered poverty's cark and care together—never shared hope and despair—never wandered, side by side, on the chill border-land of famine.

So far Alexis has shown no sign of relenting. His tone has expressed contempt rather than anger, and has wounded more deeply than the stormiest reproaches could wound. He now grows thoughtful, and walks up and down the room in meditative silence, as he has walked many a time in days gone by when his meditations were of ways and means. Sibyl watches him as he moves slowly to and fro with bent head. The twilight hides his face, that summer twilight in which they sat so often when they first became inmates of this room, and when poverty was a new thing to them.

"Why did you tell me that lie about our child?" he asks, after a long silence.

"Shall I tell you why, Alexis? It was because I wanted to have some hold upon you; to have some treasure to give you when the time came for me to come back to you, your true and faithful wife as I have been from first to last. You would scorn my uncle Stephen's fortune, you told me—repudiate that as you would repudiate me. But I thought you could not shut your heart against me if I came to you with our son. He must have been a link between us, a tie no unkindness of yours, no sin of mine, could break."

"And you thought to make that link the stronger by telling me that my son, whom you had placidly resigned to the care of a stranger, was dead."

"If I had told you the truth you would have claimed him. He would have been yours, and not mine."

"You are an accomplished schemer, Sibyl, but Fate has a knack of spoiling your plans. Accident brought me in the way of my boy; an accident, which put my life in peril for some time, brought me under the same roof with my son, and I loved him before I knew that he had any claim to my love."

"How did you discover his identity at last?" asks Sibyl, faintly.

"Oh, in a very simple way. I need not trouble you with details."

"And he is well—happy?"

"How good of you to inquire about him! Yes, he has thriven admirably with strangers. So well that he naturally rebels against being transferred to his own flesh and blood."

"Alexis," falters his wife, piteously, "I know I must seem a heartless mother, a woman without woman's natural feeling, but starvation brings humanity very low. When I came to Dorley Mill I had been keeping fellowship with Hunger for a long time. I had known what it was to be houseless and ailing, to lie shivering under the cold unpitying stars. It was vital to me to find a home for my baby, a home far away from Redcastle. I was obliged to disassociate myself from my child. It was imperative for me to do that if I wanted to win my uncle Trenchard's fortune—and I did want to be rich, Alex, for your sake, for our child's sake, as much as for my own. If it was your duty as a man to try every honest means to conquer fortune, was it a sin in me to try the only means I knew, to snatch the only chance Fate ever offered to me? Will you try to think of all this, Alex, and forgive me, if you can?"

She rises once more from the sofa where she has sat despondingly. She goes to her husband, and lays her hand lightly on his shoulder—such a poor little hand—such a feather's weight, as it seems to him, lying loosely there. That touch, faltering and tremulous, moves him more than her arguments.

"Forgive you? yes, poor child," he says, gravely. "Perhaps, after all, it is foolishness rather than sin that I have to pardon—and God pardons even sin. What am I, weak offending man, that I should be more unmerciful than Heaven? Yes, I forgive you, Sibyl; but remember, my dear, that the past is an unalterable quantity. We have to carry the burden of our past deeds down to the grave. No man ever shifts that load from his shoulders. You and I can never be again what we were the day you left this house to go in quest of fortune. You left something behind you then that you can never reclaim."

"You mean that I lost your love?"

"My affection, my compassion, you shall have to the end of our lives; but the heart that trusted and loved you is dead and gone."

"I have no right to expect that it should be otherwise," answers Sibyl, in a voice broken by sobs; "I set too much value on money. I was blind to all other loss that might befall me. I thought that when I came to you with my uncle Trenchard's fortune in my hand you would forgive me, you would take me back to your heart."

"It is because you come to me without fortune that I am able to forgive you, Sibyl. I thank Providence for the failure of your plans. No good could ever have come of Stephen Trenchard's money to me or my race."

"And you will let me see my boy, Alex. I know that I have been a heartless mother, but I have suffered many a pang of remorse. You will let me see him before——"

She breaks down here, and sobs upon her husband's shoulder.

"Before what, Sibyl?" he asks gently. "Don't cry, my dear. There are quiet days in store for both of us, now that we have got rid of our evil genius, Stephen Trenchard."

His tone is kinder than it has been yet. He has felt a touch of remorse at remembering that he could have given his erring wife a warmer welcome had she but returned to him before his experience of womanly tenderness and womanly unselfishness at Dorley Mill. It was only when he learned to draw comparisons between his wife and another woman that love had perished.

"God bless you for those kind words, Alex, the first you have spoken to me to-night; and you will let me see my child—before I die."

"Before you die! Yes, Sibyl, and through many a year to come, if you will be true to the little one and me, and put Stephen Trenchard's money out of your head. Who talks about dying?"

"I have suffered so much, Alex, and it has been so hard a task to hide every pang—to be all smiles, and gaiety, and thoughtfulness for others, with my own hidden sorrow always gnawing at my heart. It has been a bitter task. I feel as if the burden had been too heavy for me—I feel quite worn out with the long battle—physically as well as mentally. Indeed, Alexis, I do not think that I have long to live."

This is a plea for mercy *in formâ pauperis*, and touches Alexis. He is growing very tender-hearted to this wife, for whom he had told himself that his old love was dead and gone. The room in which they had suffered poverty's chilling apprenticeship together seems to him to bring them closer to each other than any less familiar place of meeting could have done. And presently, when Sibyl has struck a match and lighted a pair of sallow-looking candles, which but dimly illuminate the scene, Alexis is moved to deeper pity by seeing the change that the last six months have wrought in his wife's beauty. That wan white face, those sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, tell of a struggle that has been exhausting alike to mind and body.

"My poor girl, how changed you are!" he exclaims, drawing her to him in the dim light, and scrutinizing her altered face.

"Yes, there is no beauty to be proud of now, Alex. I might sit in my corner at Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, and even you eye would not notice me. The faded governess would come an go like a shadow. I have lost my good looks—all the capita Fortune gave me to start in life—and I have won nothing—no even uncle Trenchard's money."

"We can do without it, Sibyl. If you had come to me wit that ill-gotten wealth in your hand I would have had nothing t say to you. I take you back to-night because you com without it."

"Back to your heart, Alex?"

"To my home and my affectionate regard, my dear. Ou hearts are not always to be commanded. Don't look so sad Sibyl, our Hampshire breezes will blow the colour back to you cheeks."

"Hampshire? Ah, that is where our boy lives. But wha took you to that part of the country, Alex?"

"I'll answer that question when you have told me what too you there, and how your child came to be born in a Hampshir Union."

"I'll tell you, Alex. I have no need to hide anything now When I left you, with those ten pounds which I extorted fro you so cruelly, my only thought was to hide myself somewher till after my baby's birth. I went into a little country villag in Surrey—a quiet little place near Guildford—and hired a roo in a cottage, a tiny whitewashed bedroom which cost me thre and sixpence a week, and there I lived for seven weeks, spendin as little as possible, living on bread and butter and tea, till a last my landlady, who was only a farm labourer's wife, woul bring me up a little plate of meat sometimes out of charity. I seven weeks I had spent only four pounds on myself, but I ha spent three more in buying clothes for my baby, and I had spen almost all my time in making them—those long dull days whe I used to sit for hours together alone in my little room listenin to the ticking of the Dutch clock, and the chirping of the cricket downstairs. I think I must have gone mad in those monotonou desolate days, if it had not been for my needlework. I used t go out into the fields sometimes at dusk, and wander about fo an hour or so, and I felt as if I belonged to nobody, and wa quite the loneliest creature in this wide world."

"A sorry prologue to your dignified existence at Lancaster Lodge."

"As the time for my baby's birth drew nearer, I began to think with dread of his being born in that poor little room among coarse labouring people. I pined for a friend, any one of my own class who would be kind to me. I took a horror of that stifling little room with its one small window, and whitewashed walls, and patchwork coverlet, and all the piggy and cabbagy smells that used to creep up from the room below. So I tried to remember any friend who would be likely to be kind to me if I flung myself upon her benevolence. I could think of only one person, Maggie Rawlings, a girl who had been very fond of me at school, almost ridiculously fond, giving me keepsakes, and insisting on wearing some of my hair in a locket, and showing her affection in all manner of foolish ways. She was the daughter of a farmer in Hampshire, and as she had huge hampers sent her twice in a quarter, and had always plenty of money to spend, I concluded that her people were rich. I knew that she was an impulsive, warm-hearted little creature, and generous as the light of day. So I thought that if I went to her she would find me a shelter of some sort and be kind to me and my baby. I went to Winchester by rail, and from Winchester I went on foot to find Hill-side Farm."

"Poor child," murmurs Alexis, "poor foolish child—our worst fortunes shared together were not so bad as this."

"Unfortunately, I had forgotten all but the name of the farm, and that Winchester was the nearest station, but how far that nearest station might be from Maggie's home I had no idea. The consequence was that I wandered helplessly about from village to village for three days, led astray by wrong information—sent first to one farm and then to another—and having to sleep at village inns, where I paid dear for very poor accommodation. On the fourth day I succeeded in finding Hill-side Farm, nearly thirty miles from Winchester, and there a cruel disappointment awaited me. My old schoolfellow was married, and had gone to live in Lincolnshire. Mrs. Rawlings was barely civil to me, and gave me her daughter's address with evident reluctance. No doubt she thought me a very questionable character. My shabby clothes denounced me. If I had possessed money enough or strength enough for the journey, I think I should have gone down to Lincolnshire in search of Maggie, but I had neither. I was ill and worn out by the fatigue of the last three days, and this disappointment at the end of all completely crushed me. Two days afterwards my baby was born in the workhouse. That was the only refuge left open to me at the last. If you have been to Dorley Mill you must know all the rest. I left the workhouse penniless, and but for Linda Challice's goodness I could never have made my way to Redcastle. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Alexis, now that you know all the truth?"

"I forgive you, Sibyl, and pity you with all my heart. You did yourself a deeper wrong than you did me when you sacrificed all natural feeling to the worship of your golden calf. You have paid a heavy price for your mistake; it would be cruel to add my upbraidings to the sum. And now let us begin life afresh, little woman, and be happy if we can. Fortune has been kinder to me—who have wooed her somewhat carelessly—than to you who have sought her with such mistaken diligence. Poverty need never more afflict us. Your husband is no longer Mr. Secretan, *alias* Stanmore, a humble waiter upon the tide of luck, but Alexis Secretan, Esquire, of Cheswold Grange, in the county of Hants—able to give his wife her carriage and her flower-garden, her dairy, poultry-yard, and village school, and to leave his son the modest heritage of a small landowner."

"Alexis! you are laughing at me."

"No, Sibyl. When I stood before you at Lancaster Lodge, last December, I was able to take you to as fair a home as you could care to inhabit; but I would not tempt you with the gifts of fortune. I waited for your heart to speak."

"And you were absolutely rich at that time? You could have given me all I had to hope for from my uncle Stephen?"

"I cannot presume to measure Mr. Trenchard's possessions. My fortune, I have told you, is a modest one, but it is large enough to buy all things needful to real happiness. The man of fabulous wealth can only live. He cannot eat two dinners in the same day, or ride two horses at once, or consume more than a given quantity of fresh air, or get more pleasure out of life than his mental capacity for enjoyment will let him, be he king or kaiser."

"It seems that I have made a sorry mistake," says Sibyl, with a sigh.

"A mistake which we will do our best to mend, poor child," replies Alexis, kindly. "And now, Sibyl, I don't know whether you have dined to-day, but I am quite sure I have not. So I think the best thing I can do is to go out to our old haunts and buy a rump-steak, which our faithful Bonny will cook for our supper. Unless you had rather come to an hotel and bid the faithful Bonny good-bye."

"I had rather stay where I am for a day or two, Alex; I don't feel well enough to move."

"We must call in a medical man, Sibyl, if you are so ill as that."

"I don't think a doctor would be of any use. I am not so much ill as tired. I shall soon be better, I dare say, now you are so kind to me."

"And doesn't it cheer you to know that we have done with our old enemy, poverty; that our future is to be bright and prosperous?"

"I am glad with all my heart, Alex, for your sake and our boy's; but I do not feel as if I had any future to look forward to in this world."

"Nonsense, Sibyl! That is all the defect of debility—a hypochondriacal view of life altogether. You will see things differently after half a dozen doses of quinine, and a daily mutton chop. I shouldn't wonder if Guinness's stout were the best antidote for these dark ideas. And now I'll go and see if Mrs. Bonny can send any one for that steak, or if I must go out and forage for myself."

He goes to the door, opens it, and finds himself face to face with an unknown individual in a gray coat. Mrs. Bonny stands behind the stranger with a brass candlestick uplifted, to show him the way that he should go.

"Who the deuce are you, sir?" asks Alexis, rather savagely. "This room is not to be let."

His nerves have been too completely unstrung by that unexpected meeting of the last hour to allow of his being civil to an intrusive stranger.

"I am not looking for lodgings," answers the gray man coolly. "I have come here to look for a young lady. Ah! there she is, I see. I have a warrant to arrest Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe—on suspicion of murder."

"Suspicion of murder!"

"Yes, on suspicion of having murdered her uncle, Stephen Trenchard, Esq., of Lancaster Lodge, Redcastle, in the county of York, to be transferred in my charge to Redcastle gaol, there to remain pending the issue of the adjourned inquest held to inquire into the death of the aforesaid Stephen Trenchard, Esq."

"The man must be mad," cries Sibyl, clinging to Alexis. "I left my uncle alive—in no danger."

"Anything you say now will be used against you hereafter, miss," says the man in gray, in a warning voice.

"Alexis, you don't believe——"

"I believe nothing so wildly improbable, my dear. Let me see your warrant, sir."

It is shown him; a formal document, issued in Redcastle, Yorkshire, and endorsed by a Middlesex magistrate. Alexis knows just enough of the law to know that the warrant is a genuine instrument, and that resistance is likely to be useless. There is but one loophole.

"Your warrant seems right enough," he says, "but it is issued against Sibyl Faunthorpe; this lady is Mrs. Secretan, my wife."

"The lady may have a dozen aliases, sir," replies Mr. Judbury, with undisturbed equanimity; "but she's the lady we want, all the same; and with your leave, I'm going to take her back to Yorkshire by the mail. There's just about time to do it, I think, Trivett," adds Mr. Judbury across his shoulder to a man in the background.

"My wife is not well enough to travel," says Alexis.

"Oh, come, she was well enough to travel to London less than a week ago; she must be well enough to go back. I'll take the responsibility of removing her. You've got a cab, Trivett?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come along, Miss Faunthorpe. If you come quietly I shall say nothing about the handcuffs, you know, but I've got 'em in my pocket."

"What am I to do, Alexis?" Sibyl asks, piteously.

"If you think you can bear the journey, go, dear. I will go with you. Whatever hideous mistake has arisen out of your uncle's death can be best righted by your presence. Don't be afraid, Sibyl, I will stand by you."

"And you do not believe——"

"I believe that you are as innocent as a baby of any wrong against Stephen Trenchard," answers Alexis with conviction.

"That makes me strong," says Sibyl, quietly putting on her hat and jacket. "I will come back to Redcastle."

"Well, I think, miss, under existing circumstances you'd better," answers the officer, with suppressed satire.

"When did my uncle die?"

"The morning you left, miss, strange to say. Found dead in his bed. You left by the 6.20 train. According to the medical evidence your departure and Mr. Trenchard's death must have been pretty nearly simultaneous."

"He died suddenly, then?"

"Uncommon."

"And why do they suppose that he was murdered?"

"Because about an ounce of prussic acid was found in his inside. Please to bear in mind, miss, that any remark of yours will be used against you by-and-bye."

This warning is unheeded, nay, unheard by Sibyl.

"Prussic acid!" she cries, with an awful look. "Oh, Alex, how dreadful! I had some prussic acid in a bottle, enough to put an end to my life if there had been no other way of escape left me from that horrid man, and I left the bottle at Lancaster Lodge."

"Yes, miss, and it was found there empty."

They go down to the cab, Sibyl leaning on her husband's arm, and drive away from Dixon Street in the summer dusk. Mrs. Bonny watches the departing chariot with uplifted hands, and eyes that ask the heavens to witness her astonishment.

"This beats all my experience of lodgers," she exclaims. "That I should live to have my first floor took prisoner for murder, and to see my doorsteps spiled by the muddy boots of a defective perliceman!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"'TIS HELD THAT SORROW MAKES US WISE."

THROUGHOUT the tedious journey by the night mail Alexis supports and comforts Sibyl by his presence. All bitterness of feeling has passed out of his mind. He sees his wife the victim of a false accusation, and he is ready to pity and defend her.

"You do not believe these men, Alex?" she repeats many times during that summer night as she clings closer to her husband with a shiver as of cold, though the midsummer air is mild and balmy. "You do not believe this horrible accusation, dear?"

"Not a word, not a breath," he answers, cheerily. "These mistakes are common enough, love. It will be easily set right. You have only to keep up your courage and trust in Providence and me."

"Oh, Alex, how good you are! and how little I deserve your goodness!" she answers, with a stifled sob.

Mr. Judbury, though hardened by much travelling on the stormy path of official life, shows some delicacy of feeling. He sends his follower to a second-class carriage, and takes his seat as far from Mr. and Mrs. Secretan as the limits of a first-class compartment will allow. Nay, he is benevolent enough to refresh himself with occasional comfortable naps, but is always wakeful and alert when speed slackens and the train stops. He apparently considers that an attempt to escape from the train at full speed is an evil not to be apprehended.

So the soft summer morning dawns gradually, mysteriously, with a slow lightening of the landscape and a faint breath of chiller air creeping among the woods and across the hill-tops, and Aurora sees Mr. Judbury reposing luxuriously in his padded corner with a red silk handkerchief draped picturesquely about his bald head, and his manly chest in a manner doubled up into his shepherd's plaid waistcoat. The new-born day sheds but a sickly light upon Sibyl's worn face, as it leans against her husband's shoulder, and Alexis, scrutinizing it in that clear light, sees how marked and deep is the change that has been wrought there. Care has engraven lines that happiness can never erase. This pallid countenance, with sunken eyes, ringed with purple shadow, is but the ghost of the fair face that shone upon him in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room. Deepest pity moves him as he gazes on that altered beauty, lovely still, for the lines have the perfection of the sculptor's marble—a beauty that neither age nor death, sickness nor care can deface,—but the glow and brightness of colouring are gone. Sibyl is no longer a beauty for the vulgar eye to admire, no longer the handsomest woman in Redcastle.

That melancholy journey comes to an end at last. They arrive at Krampston in the early morning, and after waiting nearly an hour in a labyrinthine terminus get a train to convey them to Redcastle, which provincial shrine of the genius of quietude they reach at an hour which Mr. Judbury picturesquely describes as breakfast-time. From the Redcastle station, naturally half a mile out of the town, they drive to Redcastle Jail, a clean and modern building, of Gothic architecture, occupying an important site on the high road above Bar, an edifice which is described in local handbooks as an ornament to the town. Sibyl has ridden and driven past its mediæval gateway many a time, and has glanced at the lancet windows with a ladylike indifference to the life going on behind them. It seems a curious thing—a severance from all the outer world and the common round of life—to be driven under that stony arch, and along that smooth gravel drive, and to hear the iron gate close behind her with a clang that sounds like the snap of the shears of Atropos.

They all go into a stone-flagged hall together, a hall in which cleanliness and order reign supreme, and in which the ticking of a large clock overpowers all the sound of humanity. Here there is a brief consultation held between Mr. Judbury and an official, and, after a little humming and hawing, Sibyl is conducted to a small plainly furnished room, which is hardly to be called a cell. There is a bed-chamber adjoining, and both rooms are guarded with substantial doors, ponderously locked and bolted, but the place is not so bad as the dungeon she has pictured to herself with a shudder during that long journey. She has fancied herself crouching in a stone cell, with a little straw in a corner, and a large iron ring against the wall, to which she would perchance be chained, while between massive iron bars, high up in the wall, crept a faint gleam of light. This is the only kind of dungeon with which painters and poets have made her familiar.

Alexis has not been allowed to accompany his wife to the room allotted to her, but on his explaining the case to the warder he is treated with considerable civility, and taken straight to the governor of the prison, a young man who has lately exchanged a military career for the guardianship of criminals. From this gentleman Alexis receives every assurance of sympathy, and to this gentleman, Captain Heathcote, he gives a brief history of his married life, telling nothing that can throw discredit upon Sibyl, but alleging her attachment to her uncle Stephen Trenchard, as the reason of their separation and her concealment of her marriage.

"It happened, unfortunately, that the Secretans and Trenchards were, like the Montagues and Capulets, foes to the death," he tells Captain Heathcote. "There was an old feud between my poor father and Stephen Trenchard, the circumstances of which I need not enter into. I believe my father was the injured person in that quarrel; my wife naturally believed her uncle in the right. We were quietly married, in London, and my wife kept her marriage a secret from her family. When Mr. Trenchard came home from India he asked her to go and live with him. My circumstances at that time were at very low water, and I had no home to give my wife. So she came to Redcastle, resumed her maiden name, and lived under her uncle's roof, until his attempt to force her into a marriage with an East Indian *protégé* of his compelled her to leave his house."

Captain Heathcote listens, and is thoughtful. The story sounds credible enough, and is in some measure confirmed by the copy of the marriage register, which Alexis shows the captain. Captain Heathcote, upon whose military status Redcastle society looks kindly, though inclined to be somewhat supercilious about his official position, has met Sibyl at Colonel Stormont's, and it goes hard with him to imagine that she can have been capable of this hideous crime which is imputed to her. Yet it must be confessed that there was never a more awkward combination of circumstances. Her secret flight—coincident with her uncle's death; her possession of the poison—or the same kind of poison—by which he died; the finding of the empty bottle in her work-basket; and now this revealment of her marriage, so long concealed from those among whom she has lived—her nearest friends and kindred—these things suggest a capacity for deceit—a disposition in which duplicity is second nature. These considerations make Captain Heathcote grave and thoughtful, but he is not the less courteous and obliging.

"You may be assured I shall do all in my power to lessen the painfulness of Miss—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Secretan's position. We are never very severe in our treatment of persons who are here only under suspicion; and until Mrs. Secretan is committed for trial—which I trust she will not be—we shall contrive to relax our rules as much as possible in her favour. Burton tells me he has given her comfortable rooms."

"You are very good. Please God she will not be long under this horrible suspicion. I imagine that directly the matter is investigated her innocence must appear; but in the meanwhile I am most grateful for your kindness. My wife is looking very ill. I think she really requires medical attendance. Her uncle is a medical man in this town; perhaps it would be as well for him to see her, if it might be allowed."

"Certainly. Dr. Faunthorpe is not our official surgeon, but he might see Mrs. Secretan."

"Thanks. And may I be allowed to see her?"

"As often as you like; but not alone. I shall be obliged to place a female warder in Mrs. Secretan's room."

"I am not likely to have anything to say which the warder may not hear; and I shall be glad to know that my wife is not alone. She is in a very low state of health, and will be all the better for companionship, however humble."

"You would like to see her, perhaps, before you leave?"

"Very much."

"Then we'll go to her."

Captain Heathcote leads the way to a clean and airy corridor, beckons to a warder to unlock a door, and admits Alexis into the prisoner's room.

Sibyl is sitting listlessly by the open window—a closely barred window looking into the stone quadrangle where the prisoners are solemnly tramping, single file, in a circle, for their regulation hour of air and exercise. A respectable young woman, in a white muslin cap, has just brought a cup of tea and a plate of bread and butter for the new arrival. There is no question of jail fare yet awhile. Mrs. Secretan could have ortolans or *pâtés de foie gras*, if she liked to import those delicacies from the outside world.

"My dear Sibyl, Captain Heathcote has been kind enough to promise that you shall have all possible indulgence, so you must try to keep up your spirits."

"Yes, Alexis," she answers, quietly, "I have very little cause for unhappiness when you are so kind to me. How do you do, Captain Heathcote?" she says, turning to the governor with a faint smile. "It seems strange for us to meet like this, does it not? I feel as if I had come to your house as an uninvited guest."

"I shall do all in my power to make your visit agreeable, and shall be unhospitable enough to wish that it may be brief," answers the captain.

"I am very anxious to know all about my uncle's death," says Sibyl. "It was a great shock to me to hear that he was dead. Dr. Mitsand told me that he was in no danger the very day before I left Redcastle. Can it be true that he died from poison?"

"Unhappily there is no room to doubt that," answers Captain

Heathcote, gravely; "but do not let us talk about this sad business, Mrs. Secretan. Your husband will do all that can be done to protect your interests—to clear your name. Be assured of that, and give your mind as much repose as you can. The inquest will be re-opened to-morrow, and you will have to appear."

"As a criminal—in the dock?" asks Sibyl, with a shudder.

"There is no dock in the coroner's court."

"My dearest, what does it matter?" says Alexis, soothingly. "To-morrow's examination will doubtless clear you of this shameful charge. Be patient, and trust in God. I am going to call upon your uncle, Dr. Faunthorpe. I thought perhaps you would like him to come and see you."

"Yes, I should like to see him very much, if he does not believe that I am——I can't say the dreadful words, Alex. But no, I am sure uncle Robert does not believe in this accusation. Dear soul, he never thought evil of any one."

"You shall see him, dear, and he shall prescribe for you, unless there is any other medical man whose advice you would rather have."

"I do not think medicine can do me much good, Alex; but I shall consult any one you wish. But I want to see uncle Robert—to ask him about uncle Stephen's death—he must know everything; and about the will."

"Ah, by the way," exclaims Alexis, "there was a will, I suppose. And pray who is the gainer of Mr. Trenchard's wealth?"

Captain Heathcote looks at the inquirer with a grave smile.

"Have you heard nothing? Don't you know the particulars?" he asks.

"We know nothing except that Mr. Trenchard is dead, and is supposed to have been poisoned. Has his will been read yet?"

"His will—or rather, a final statement of his circumstances, briefly set forth in a paper to be read after his death, was made known to two or three people yesterday. As generally happens in Redcastle, what was known to three people in the morning had become town-talk in the evening. Mr. Trenchard has not left sixpence to any one."

Sibyl's eyes open to their widest. Faintly, dimly during that wearisome night journey she had seen herself cleared from the monstrous charge of murder and possessed of Stephen Trenchard's fortune. His sudden death would have prevented his disinheriting her. Death overtook him before he could have known of her flight.

"Do you mean to say that he has left all his money to hospitals?" exclaimed Alexis.

"I mean to say that he has left no money whatever—or hardly enough for the payment of five shillings in the pound upon his debts. We are very wise in Redcastle, but with all our wisdom are apt to take outward show for reality. Mr. Trenchard has contrived to impose upon us all. He has been living upon a few thousands taken out of a business on the verge of insolvency, and upon his credit in Redcastle, which was rather large. Rather hard upon Mrs. Secretan, whom everybody supposed to be his heiress."

"The policy of his old age is of a piece with the treachery of his youth," replies Alexis, quietly. "My wife can afford to do without his money."

Sibyl sits silent, in utter bewilderment. What phantom has she followed in these years that are gone? To what false idol has she sacrificed love and truth, and duty to husband and child, all fair things that are honourable in woman? Bad enough to have worshipped a golden calf; but to find the calf of basest metal is indeed the lowest depth of humiliation and disgrace.

"Alexis," she says at last, looking piteously at her husband, "there never was any one so foolish, so deluded, as I have been. How you must despise me!"

"No, my dear, I am only sorry for you and our mistaken lives, the lost years that can never come back to us."

CHAPTER XLIX.

"BUT HERE IS ONE WHO LOVES YOU AS OF OLD."

Mr. Secretan is not sorry to get away from that quiet orderly room in the prison, where never comes any sound of outward things more human than the creaking of the warder's boots in the passage, or the ticking of that inexorable clock in the hall—dismal clock that checks off hours that are heavier than lead, minutes whose every moment is a sigh.

Alexis would willingly stay all day with his wife, to lighten the burden of her solitude, to strengthen the fainting heart with words of cheerfulness and comfort, if he had not work to do elsewhere. He has a task to perform, and a difficult one, and he hardly knows how to set about it. He has been careful to ask no questions of Captain Heathcote, feeling that the governor's position must compel him to caution and reticence. He stands as it were upon the opposite side in that game of life and death which has to be played out—the rouge et noir of the criminal court. Not to him can Alexis look for information or assistance.

Mr. Secretan leaves the prison sorely perplexed as to what his first step should be. At present he knows nothing, save that Stephen Trenchard is supposed to have died from prussic acid, and that Sibyl has confessed to having had a bottle of prussic acid in her possession at Lancaster Lodge.

"We must meet law with law, I suppose," thinks Alexis. "As my wife is in the grip of the law, I must get a lawyer to fight her battle."

He thinks of the names he has seen in connection with the criminal courts—names that have a sound of power,—and there is one that comes uppermost in his mind, super-eminent and invincible, a shield and buckler in the fight.

This is the legal firm of Levison and Levison, Parchment Street, Viaduct Hill.

He goes straight to the telegraph office, and telegraphs to Messrs. Levison and Levison, solicitors, requesting that one of their firm may start for Redcastle that afternoon, a most urgent case, money no object. He feels fortified against danger in some measure when he has sent this message, and goes from the station to Dr. Faunthorpe's.

The shabby old house looks a little shabbier and more woebegone than usual to-day in the vivid sunshine of midsummer. Hester, whose spirits generally maintain an equable acidity, has drooped and given way to absolute despair since the revelation of Stephen Trenchard's insolvency. It seems to her as if the shattered fortunes of the house of Faunthorpe had received the final blow that brings them to the dust. Jerusalem besieged by Titus could hardly have fallen lower. The idea of Stephen Trenchard's fortune—to be divided in some manner among his nieces—had been the faithful servant's only day-dream. She had not set her hopes very high. She had languished for no translation to a loftier sphere, but she had believed that a little money would find its way through his nieces to the pockets of Robert Faunthorpe. She had fancied that the dilapidated old house would be painted and whitewashed, some of the worm-eaten flooring replaced with sound wood—new deal—which would repay the labour of her scrubbing-brush. She had pictured her master in a new coat. She had told herself that a few pounds spent upon the pony carriage would rehabilitate that vehicle, and that a new set of harness would make the pony a gentleman. Long arrears of wages due to herself in times past, a sum that would have doubled itself by this time at compound interest, might possibly be paid in that flood tide of fortune; but this last item was one of secondary consideration in the faithful Hester's mind. She wanted to see the family raise its head from the dust. She wanted to feel that the house of Faunthorpe had something of the phœnix in its nature. The habits of this fabulous bird have been made familiar to Hester, not in the pages of Herodotus, but by the fire office which has taken it for its device and emblem.

The disappointment has been very bitter to the doctor's two younger nieces, and Marion lies on the sofa and bewails her fate, and declares rebelliously that she will never more try to deserve well of Providence.

"What's the use of being good?" she demands, with an injured air. "One couldn't be used worse if one was a forger or a murderer. I didn't expect much. Sibyl's artfulness nipped *my* expectations in the bud, but I did build upon getting something, if it was only a paltry five thousand pounds."

Jenny is more philosophical, and more easily reconciled to Fate.

"If he hadn't any money to leave, he couldn't leave it to us," she argues, "but he must have been a sly old fox to make believe to be a millionaire, and take in all Redcastle."

"A wicked old impostor," exclaims Marion, wrathfully.

"Poor Sibyl's disappointment will be worse than ours," says Jane.

"Yes, that's a comfort. She'll find how she has wasted all her scheming and artfulness on a Jesuitical old pauper. She'll feel small enough, I should think."

"Perhaps she knew the truth all along, and was laughing in her sleeve at our expectations," suggests Jenny.

"She's deep enough for anything. However, I forgive her all her baseness now, and pity her with all my heart," says Marion, with a magnanimous air. "She'll find life a very different thing now she has seen the last of Lancaster Lodge."

"I hope she won't get into trouble about that prussic acid," says Jenny, thoughtfully.

And Marion also grows grave. That question about the prussic acid is serious. One might wish one sister's unholy pride in temporal blessings to be chastised by Providence, for her own spiritual chastening and benefit, but one would shrink appalled from the idea of that erring sister lying under a suspicion of having poisoned her uncle. In the first place such an imputation would be too severe a punishment for the offender, and in the second it would cast discredit upon all her family.

"It's my opinion that uncle Trenchard has spent all his money, and knew he must be found out if he let things go on any longer, and got out of the difficulty by poisoning himself," says Jenny, sagely. "The only thing that's hard to account for is how he could have got hold of the prussic acid that Sibyl took out of the surgery."

“It mightn't have been that very prussic acid that killed him, stupid,” exclaims Marion, contemptuously.

“True,” says Jenny.

“If you had only held that blabbing tongue of yours nobody need have known that Sibyl had ever taken anything out of the surgery,” says Marion. “If we are all brought to disgrace it will be your doing.”

Whereat Jenny bursts into tears and weeps dismally for the next half-hour. She has shed many a tear about that fatal communicativeness of hers within the last few days.

They are sitting in the front parlour when this conversation takes place, on the morning of Mr. Secretan's arrival in Redcastle, and when Jenny has wept till her eyeballs ache, she wanders listlessly to the window, and stares out at the small square garden, where the bountiful cabbage roses and a few ancient perennials bloom as well as the dust will allow them. There is not much in the way of traffic at this end of the town. A farmer's cart jolts by once in half an hour, or a labouring man passes on a plough horse, or a drove of oxen straggles by, hunted by an abusive driver. Not often do the *élite* of Redcastle penetrate to this end of the town. There is not much distraction of mind, therefore, to be obtained from looking out of the window, and Jenny contemplates external things from listlessness rather than interest. But on a sudden, to the surprise of her sister, who has buried herself in a novel, Jenny ejaculates abruptly,—

“Good gracious! It's him.”

“Whatever our family troubles are, you might remember that the verb to be takes the same case after as before it, Jane,” remonstrates Marion with dignity. “And pray whom do you mean by him?”

“The young man,” cries Jane, incautious in her surprise. “My brother-in-law.”

“What does the ridiculous child mean?” exclaims Marion, pulling herself up from the sofa with a wrench, and looking out at the gate.

Yes, there is a very good-looking and gentleman-like young man in the act of entering at that modest green gate.

“Why, he's a perfect stranger,” says Marion.

“Is he?” remarks Jenny, who has recovered her self-possession by this time; “ah, to be sure, now I look at him, I see he s a stranger. I took him for someone else.”

“It's my belief you are demented, child,” cries Marion, crossly. “I suppose he's a patient for uncle.”

Marion is confirmed in this belief when Mr. Secretan inquires for Dr. Faunthorpe, and on being told that he is out, asks permission to wait his return. He looks respectable, nay, even superior to some of the Redcastle gentry, so Hester shows him into the surgery, and asks him to take a seat.

"The doctor always runs home for his bit of dinner when he can," she says, "and I don't think he was going very far to-day, so he'll be in by half an hour or so, I dare say."

Left in the surgery, Alexis thinks of that summer day, nearly a year ago, when he came here in quest of his truant wife, and allowed himself to be put on a false scent by a schoolgirl's deceitfulness. He is very angry with Jane Faunthorpe to-day, when he thinks that all the evil that has befallen Sibyl might have been prevented had that child told the truth.

"But she had been taught her lesson by Sibyl, no doubt," he reflects; "I do wrong to blame her."

He has more than an hour to wait for Dr. Faunthorpe, a weary while, for he is burning with impatience to know all than can be known about Stephen Trenchard's death. It is past two o'clock when the doctor comes into the surgery looking tired and anxious, and Alexis feels as if much precious time had been lost.

He hastens to introduce himself to Robert Faunthorpe, and to give that bewildered practitioner the history of Sibyl's marriage.

"Sir, you petrify me," exclaims the meek little doctor, wiping the perspiration from his bald forehead with an ancient silk handkerchief. "Do you mean to tell me that my niece, whom I have ever considered the incarnation of candour, could be capable of so deceiving me?"

"It was not your resentment she feared, Dr. Faunthorpe, but her uncle Trenchard's antipathy to my name. You are no doubt acquainted with the family history."

"Yes, yes, my poor sister-in-law told me the story."

"That family quarrel of the past was Sibyl's motive for concealing her marriage with me. And now that you know who I am, I have to speak of something much more serious. Your niece has been arrested on suspicion of being concerned in her uncle's murder, and is now in Redcastle gaol."

Dr. Faunthorpe sinks into a chair, speechless with horror. For the last three days and nights he has lived in the apprehension of something like this, but the reality seems more dreadful than his fears.

"Don't tell me so," he cries.

"It is unhappily the truth. I was with my wife at the time of her arrest. I am here to protect and defend her. And now tell me all you know about Stephen Trenchard's death."

Dr. Faunthorpe tells all that is to be told—disjointedly at first, but on being closely questioned by Alexis, plainly enough at the last. He tells Alexis the unlucky facts connected with that blue bottle of prussic acid; he tells Alexis the various opinions, conjectures, and rumours which obtain in Redcastle.

"Why should he not have poisoned himself?" asks Alexis.

"Ah, we might have supposed that; but then comes the question of the bottle, or vessel from which he took the poison. With so powerful a dose death would have been instantaneous; he would not have had time to throw the bottle from him; he must have died clutching it. And the empty bottle was found in Sybil's work-basket."

"Where it might have been easily placed by any one who wished to fix the guilt upon her."

"Yes, of course. If we could only prove that."

"We must prove that, Dr. Faunthorpe. We must find the poisoner, or shew that Stephen Trenchard took the poison of his own free will. He may have felt that his game was played out, and may have adopted suicide as a happy escape out of his difficulties."

"That might be."

Alexis has made notes of Dr. Faunthorpe's answers to his questions. He has made a list of the people in the house at the time of Stephen Trenchard's death.

"How about this Joel Pilgrim? Why should he not be suspected rather than Sibyl?"

"There is that unfortunate circumstance of Sibyl's flight, and the prussic acid taken from this surgery."

"Both facts tell against her. Yet, if she had been guilty, she would have been too wise to excite suspicion by that secret departure; and if she had wanted to commit murder she would hardly have chosen a poison which she must have known is of all poisons the most easily detected."

Dr. Faunthorpe's only answer is a hopeless sigh. He is borne down, nay, crushed, by calamity. Whatever elasticity of spirit Nature may have endowed him with at the outset of life has been worn out of him by a long career of self-abnegation and endurance. He is so accustomed to trouble, sorrow is such a common flavour in his cup, that he cannot easily look beyond the darkness of the hour. To-day he sees himself enclosed in an impenetrable cloud of misery. Freely, gladly would he give his life—such feeble remnant of life as he holds—to save his niece, but he cannot devise any mode of being helpful to her.

"This Pilgrim must be the man," says Alexis, after reading over his notes meditatively.

"I cannot see any motive——"

"Can you not? He may have believed in Trenchard's wealth, and expected to inherit some of it. He may have wanted money badly, and determined on hastening his inheritance."

"There is one little circumstance that I ought, perhaps, to have told you," begins the doctor, falteringly.

"For God's sake tell me everything."

"It was after the post-mortem. Dr. Mitsand, who has taken up this matter in a very energetic spirit, asked a few questions of the butler at Lancaster Lodge."

"Well?"

"The questions themselves were of no particular importance—touching the position of a table beside the bed, the bottles and glasses, and so on. But there was something in the man's manner which struck Dr. Mitsand and myself as remarkable. He had been drinking, I believe, and may have been muddled by drink. But he had, to my mind, and Dr. Mitsand's, the manner of a person labouring under some kind of apprehension. He had a shifty look, and answered the simplest questions reluctantly, as if afraid to commit himself. At the coroner's inquest he appeared in the same muddled state—worse, indeed, and drew upon himself a severe reprimand from the coroner."

"Is the man still at Lancaster Lodge?"

"Yes. I saw him go in at the lodge gate to-day as I came past on my way home."

"Then I'll see him without delay, and see what is to be made of him," says Alexis.

"In a case of such importance would it not be better to employ a detective?" suggests the doctor, humbly.

"Dr. Faunthorpe, in a case that affects my wife's honour and her life there is no detective living whose wits would be keener than mine," replies Alexis. "I will trust no one with this work while I have power to do it myself."

And thus they part.

CHAPTER L.

ALEXIS INVESTIGATES.

Before going to Lancaster Lodge, Alexis goes back to the jail, and spends half an hour with his wife. He feels that it would be cruel to leave her all through the long lonely day. He finds her curiously patient and quiet, resigned to the horror of her position, and touchingly grateful for his interest in her.

"It is a strange end to all my dreams, Alexis," she says sadly. "I fancied that when our reconciliation came life would be full of brightness for us. I have comforted myself in many a lonely hour with the thought of our reunion. We should be fabulously rich, free as air, with all the world and its pleasures before us. The reality is strikingly different from the day-dream, is it not? No freedom, no wealth. Our reconciliation finds me a prisoner and a pauper."

"The prison will not be for long, dear, and I have fortune enough for both of us. So you need not regret your day-dream about Stephen Trenchard's wealth, a factor which had no real existence in the sum of our lives."

"Why did I not learn wisdom from my spelling-book, that dog's-eared old spelling-book, with fables for reading lessons?"

says Sibyl, with her faint smile. "I am like the dog in the fable, who dropped the substance to snatch the shadow."

She asks no questions as to his morning's occupation. She seems in no manner to realize the peril of her situation, and the urgency of prompt action. Perhaps she is more womanly in this hour of trial than she has been at any other crisis of her life. Alexis has forgiven her. That is the one fact she dwells upon most, and the danger and horror of her position touch her lightly. That which she feels most bitterly is to know herself the dupe of her own avarice, fooled to the top of her bent by false appearances, mocked at perhaps in secret by the insolvent Belial of her worship.

"Love is better than gold or silver, Alexis," she says, resting her languid head upon her husband's shoulder.

"Poets, philosophers, and sages have been singing that chorus ever since the world began, Sibyl. Yet there are a good many people left who set their affections on filthy lucre, and, however much we may abuse it, that yellow ore which keeps the world moving has some good uses as well as evil ones. And now I must leave you for an hour or too. I have some more business to get through in your lively town. You will not be alone all the afternoon, dear. Dr. Faunthorpe is coming to see you."

"Dear uncle Robert! Oh, Alex! how I hate myself when I remember my neglect of that dear good man, while I paid my court to an impostor! And yet, perhaps, I have no right to say that. I have been thinking over the past as I sat here this morning, and I see that I have been self-deceived rather than the dupe of uncle Trenchard. He never told me that he meant to make me his heiress. He never told me that he had a great fortune to leave. It was other people who deceived me. Those Stormonts and their set, always harping upon one string, courting me and flattering me as the heiress elect. I have little right to blame my uncle. He did not know how much I had sacrificed for his sake. He did not know how false and wicked a part I was playing. He was anxious that I should make a rich marriage, that I should profit by the false appearances that surrounded me, and establish myself before he died. He meant kindly by that at any rate."

"We will say no harm of the dead, my dear. And now good-bye for a few hours."

Alexis meets Dr. Faunthorpe on his way out. The good little man has only stopped to perform some necessary duties in the dispensing line before hastening to his niece.

From Redcastle Jail to Lancaster Lodge is only ten minutes' walk. Alexis has no difficulty in finding the mansion which he came to six months ago in the winter dusk, for Lancaster Lodge has made itself unusually conspicuous to-day, having put on a breastplate of auctioneer's bills, announcing that all the elegant furniture, brass bedsteads, superior bedding, German spring mattresses, best Brussels, Axminster, velvet pile, and other carpeting, glass, china, pictures, electro-plated goods, valuable library of standard authors, grand piano by Broadwood, patent lawn-mowing machine, knife-cleaning apparatus, and other household effects, together with the valuable lease of the mansion, at a moderate rent, are to be disposed of by public auction on Monday next, July 3rd, and three following days, the whole to be on view on the previous Saturday, admission by catalogue, price one shilling.

This is Thursday, and Alexis resolves to ask for a private view of the mansion. The request may be a little out of order perhaps, but a judicious distribution of half-crowns will, in all probability, remove difficulties. This man, Podmore, the late Mr. Trenchard's butler, is doubtless in charge of the house.

Alexis makes his application at the lodge gate, where the lodgekeeper's wife has taken prompt advantage of Mr. Trenchard's death to hang out her family linen on the laurels and conifers in the shrubbery.

"It's a comfort to do a bit of washing in freedom," this matron has remarked to her liege lord, the head gardener. "Mr. Trenchard were so partikeller."

"Partikeller," growls the husband. "He were a man that allus wanted eighteenpennoith o' work for a shillin'. I don't call that there partikeller. Seems to me that there breed's raytlier common."

Mollified by half-a-crown, the guardians of the gate are of opinion that Mr. Secretan can see the house.

"It ain't the day," says the gardener, scratching his head doubtfully; "you'll see wot's wrote up on they bills—Saturday. But if you're only passin' through and wanted to see if there's anythink you'd like to bid for, I dessay as they might strain a pint up at the house. There's old Podmore, the butler, a very pertikler old party, but still he's ameliable to reason."

Alexis, having passed the outer gate of the citadel, goes straight to the hall door, where he finds Mr. Podmore sunning himself on the threshold, cadaverous and flaccid of aspect, as a man who has been living for the last few days upon gin-and-water, and slovenly in his apparel—as a man who, having retired from official life, feels that he has no occasion to be punctilious in the use of soap and water. To him Alexis makes his request.

"There are some pictures that I want to see," he says, "and, as I am only passing through the town, I shall be much obliged if you can let me see them to-day."

He accompanies the request with a dexterous passage of half-a-sovereign from his fingers to Podmore's palm—quite a delicate feat in prestigiation.

Podmore turns his gin-and-watery eyes upon the applicant with a puzzled air, dimly recalling that face and voice as in some wise familiar to him on the blurred page of memory. But memory's page is so much blotted that he vainly strives to decipher the imperfect record.

"Ain't I seen you before somewhere?" he asks, feebly.

"Very possibly," replies Alexis.

"You ain't been a visitor here in the old gentleman's time?"

"No."

"Then it must have been in some former situation. Yes, you can see the pictures. There's no harm in that. Not that the pictures are good for much—reg'lar Wardour Street duffers supplied by the upholsterer, old Kabriole, and now he's served an attachment on the goods as chief creditor. He's been let in nicely, has old Kabriole. The 'ousekeeper 'll show you round. There's only me and her left in the 'ouse now, and it's very lonesome. In fack," adds Podmore, confidentially, "it's undermining my spirits. I feel that low, I could shed tears by the pailful."

"Yes," replies Alexis, watchful of the butler's countenance. "It must be dreary work living in a house where a foul crime has been committed—the foulest of crimes, secret murder."

Podmore looks uncomfortable at this, but he hardly realizes Mr. Secretan's idea of a man stricken with the sense of guilt. But then there are some criminals so callous, some men with whom crime is, as it were, a natural development; and from these the agonies of remorse, the throes and convulsions of a guilt-burdened soul, are not to be looked for. Had not Nemesis overtaken William Palmer, in the person of his latest victim's stepfather, that practised plotter against the lives of his friends and relatives would, doubtless, have gone on driving his profitable trade, and gone down to the grave jaunty and debonnaire, liked and trusted by his comrades, the jolly good fellow of his jovial circle. Be sure no tell-tale muscle of Mr. Palmer's face assisted the task of detection, no quiver of that iron lip betrayed the hand of the poisoner as he presented the fatal draught to the lips of his friend. Phrenology has declared that in that man's brain the capacity for pity or remorse was wanting.

"The 'ousekeeper 'll take you round," repeats Podmore, slipping the half-sovereign into his pocket.

Podmore's eyes are dull and watery, and his breath is flavoured with juniper berries, or it may be turpentine; his limbs are heavy, and he is averse from motion. He calls a thin and vinegar-faced female, whose temper has been soured by a life-long devotion to the kitchen stove, and an apparatus she describes as a "bang Mary"—a large metal tray, containing a family of stew-pans of various sizes, in which sauces, glazes, and divers savoury compositions simmer gently in a perpetual warm bath. The bain Marie and the stove together have been too much for Mrs. Skinner's temper, which is disagreeably suggestive of that fiery region she has so long inhabited.

"This gentleman wants to have a look round the house," says

Podmore, in those thick and hazy tones which have become habitual to him.

"Then he must come on the proper day," replies Mrs. Skinner, snappishly.

"Oh, but it's all right; he's got a horder. You're to show him everythink."

Mrs. Skinner looks doubtful; but on a solemn wink from the hazy Podmore, yields the point, expectant of largess.

"You can come this way," she says to Alexis, with scant courtesy.

"I should like to see the room in which Mr. Trenchard died," says Alexis, when he has surveyed the drawing-room and dining-room, dismal tabernacles of upholstery.

"I hope you haven't come out of curiosity," says Mrs. Skinner, reproachfully. "It's the first time *I* ever lived in a house where there was suspicion of murder, and it's very trying to my feelings. My father was a respectable tradesman. I wasn't brought up to this sort of thing."

"Curiosity has not brought me here," replies Alexis, "but I have a particular desire to see the room in which Mr. Trenchard died."

He is about to say, "and to hear all you can tell me about his death," but it strikes him that Mrs. Skinner, despite her acid countenance, will talk freely of her own accord presently, not for his gratification, but for the relief of her own pent-up feelings. He politely offers her half a sovereign, which she takes with a curtsey, and as near an approach to a smile as her features can shape.

"Thank you kindly, sir. I won't deny that it is acceptable, finding one's self suddenly out of place, and disappointed of any little legacy one had a right to expect. I'm sure the pains I took with the old gentleman's curries was quite wearing to my nerves—scraped cocoa-nuts, and prawns, and chutnee, and oysters, and all manner of fiddle-faddle, and his Bombay ducks, and his rubbish; but he's gone to his last account, and will have to answer for 'em all, I make no doubt, and for his deception towards his servants."

"And his favourite niece," suggests Alexis. "The deception came hardest upon her."

"Ah!" sighs Mrs. Skinner, pursing up her lips. "When young folks hold their heads too high, Providence is apt to lay snares and pitfalls for them. We've king David's word for that in the Psalms."

Alexis remembers that "a favourite has no friends."

The housekeeper, considerably mollified by the stranger's liberality, leads the way to Mr. Trenchard's bedchamber, where the furniture has a gloomy and even shabby look since the auctioneer's men have overhauled it—everything pushed out of its place and twisted the wrong way, defaced with lot numbers, degraded from its pride and pomp. The bedstead heaped with an untidy pile of bedding, bundles of blankets, tumbled counterpane and sheeting. Things that careful housewives think they ought to get very cheaply under such conditions, but which generally cost the feminine bargain-hunter more than if they came straight from a draper's shop.

Alexis notices the door by the head of the bed.

"There is a second door to Mr. Trenchard's room, I see," he remarks.

"Yes, sir."

"Was that always unlocked?"

"Yes, that was kept unlocked for Podmore to come down to give Mr. Trenchard his medicine."

Mrs. Skinner opens the door and shows Alexis the landing on the back staircase, and the flight of stairs leading to Podmore's room. There are two more doors that open on to this landing. Alexis inquires about these.

"That one opens into Mr. Trenchard's dressing-room," replies Mrs. Skinner, "and this," indicating the further door, "into Mr. Pilgrim's room."

Alexis opens this last door and looks into Mr. Pilgrim's apartment, a comfortable bachelor's room, with another door opening into the gallery at the top of the principal staircase. Lancaster Lodge belongs to a period of domestic architecture in which architects delighted in the multiplication of doors, and if prevented by untoward conditions from putting in real doors consoled themselves by filling in their blank corners with ornamental dummies leading to nowhere.

"Mr. Trenchard's room was as easily accessible to Mr. Pilgrim as to the butler," says Alexis. "And now show me Miss Faunthorpe's rooms."

Mrs. Skinner obeys, and Alexis finds that, taking into consideration that Mr. Trenchard's door of communication with the gallery was locked on the inside on the night of his death, Sibyl could only have entered his apartment by going down the principal staircase, opening a door which Mrs. Skinner declares to have been always locked after ten o'clock in the evening, and the key in her possession, crossing a lobby, and ascending the servants' staircase.

Stay, there is another way; if Stephen Trenchard's dressing-room has a door opening on the gallery.

He hastens to ascertain this. No, there are two doors to the dressing-room, but neither communicates with the gallery. One opens into the bed-room, the other on to the landing before mentioned.

This must surely make a strong point in Sibyl's favour. While all communication between her room and her uncle's was cut off in the night-time, Joel Pilgrim and Podmore had easy access to the dead man's bedchamber.

To this argument a counsel for the prosecution might reply that the poison was possibly put ready for the patient's own hand, on the eve of the murder, mixed with his drink or his medicine.

Yet in the latter case, Podmore, who administered the poison, must have seen its deadly effect; unless the man were, as Alexis supposes, an habitual drunkard, and too far gone on this occasion to take notice of his master's condition. This seems too much to believe. Even stupid drunkenness would have sense enough to perceive the effect of a deadly and instantaneous poison.

Alexis sees Sibyl's boudoir, where the prussic acid bottle was found in the work-basket. Might it not, he asks himself, have been taken from that basket full, and returned to it empty, by some other hand than Sibyl's? And yet how should any one else have known of her possession of the poison?

The housekeeper has been obligingly communicative. She has entered into all the details of Stephen Trenchard's last illness and death, dwelling on the gloomiest particulars with that ghoul-like relish peculiar to women of her kind. She has described the finding of the body—its awful appearance—Miss Faunthorpe's mysterious flight, "which naturally set folks against her."

"You don't surely believe her to have had anything to do with her uncle's death?" cries Alexis.

Mrs. Skinner shakes her head solemnly, till the crape roses and jet ornaments in her cap—she has brought out some dingy weeds laid by from a previous time of mourning—tremble and shiver.

"I don't like to express an opinion as a Christian woman," she says, "but the opinion in Redcastle is that Miss Faunthorpe did it. She had the poison—there's no denying that—and she got it in an underhand way, and then on the very morning of her uncle's death she runs away, secretly—and no one knows where she's gone."

"A way to proclaim her guilt, which she would hardly have taken if she were guilty. She would not be so short-sighted as that."

"Murderers generally are short-sighted," replies Mrs Skinner, sagely. "It's a merciful dispensation of Providence by which they run their necks into nooses. There's not much good could be done by the detective police if it wasn't for the short-sightedness of criminals."

"That's a very wise remark, Mrs. Skinner, and I'm surprised that so sensible a woman as you can imagine that poor girl guilty of a crime which only a hardened sinner could conceive."

"There's no knowing where to look for hardened sinners," replies the housekeeper. "Ministers wouldn't tell us about original sin in the pulpit if wickedness wasn't born with some of us. And as to good looks, they're no criterion. Black thoughts may lie behind pretty faces as well as ugly ones."

And Alexis foresees that, with the female community in Redcastle, Sibyl's beauty will be no certificate of innocence. He pursues the subject no further, seeing that loose conjectures of Mrs. Skinner's will in no wise help in the unravelling of this tangled skein.

"I rather wonder," he says, thoughtfully, still moving about the empty rooms, and making believe to examine the furniture, "that Mr. Trenchard should have employed your fellow-servant as his attendant in illness. I should have supposed from his manner to-day that he was somewhat inclined to drinking."

"Ah," says Mrs. Skinner. "Well you may think so, for of all the sots that ever was, there never was a stupider sot than Joseph Podmore has been since his master's death."

"Since," cries Alexis. "Was he sober before then?"

"Yes, sir. Joseph and me has been fellow-servants here since Mr. Trenchard took this house, three and a half years ago, and I must say that Joseph Podmore has never laid himself open to reproach in all that time. Not but what he liked his beer at dinner and supper, and his tumbler of grog after supper, and a glass of dry sherry wine with his mouthful of bread and cheese between breakfast and dinner, but was never the worse for anything he took."

"And since his master's death——"

"He has never been properly sober, muddling himself with gin and beer—dog's nose, he calls it, and the very lowness of the name is enough to set any decent person against the stuff, let alone its being cold and comfortless to the inside, all day long, and that low in his spirits, that it's a misery to be in his company."

"Low-spirited?" asks Alexis.

"Awful: and yet, according to his own account, things have prospered with him, for he says he's going to take a public-house, and begin life as an independent gentleman directly he leaves here; though how he can have saved money to go into business, seeing that he has a wife and two children to keep out of his wages, and she an extravagant drab into the bargain, flaunting about after dark with a Paisley shawl down to her heels, and a black lace bonnet with roses in it, and a baby in one arm and a market basket over the other, which I call out of keeping,—how Podmore can have saved money with such a drag upon him is more than I can account for."

Again it flashes upon Alexis that this man is the murderer. Every word of Mrs. Skinner's tends to confirm him in that idea. He pushes his inquiry a stage further.

"By the way," he begins, "have you any idea whether Mr. Trenchard had money about him at the time of his death? May he not have had a sum of money in his possession at that time—sufficient to offer a temptation to an assassin? Murders have been inspired by very small temptations of that kind."

"I know that, sir. But I don't see how Mr. Trenchard can have had much ready money about him. He had no call for it. He always paid everything by cheque—even servants' wages. And it wasn't often that he paid the tradesmen anything except at Christmas-time. I don't see what he could have wanted with ready money in the house."

"You never heard of his keeping money in his room, or saw him open a box, desk, or drawer containing money?"

"Never."

"Had he any valuable jewellery in his possession?"

"I never saw him wear so much as a diamond ring. His watch was all the jewellery he ever wore, and that was found under his pillow."

This seems a kind of no thoroughfare. If Mr. Trenchard had no valuables to tempt Podmore's cupidity, why should the butler have murdered him, and whence the talk about taking a public-house, since it is clear from Mrs. Skinner's account of Podmore's domestic responsibilties that he can hardly have saved money. A slatternly wife in a flaunting Paisley shawl, marketing after dark, is as exhaustive a drain upon a husband's finances as the bottomless bucket of the Danaides.

"One thing about money I do remember," exclaims Mrs. Skinner after a pause; "and I must say it struck me as singular after I'd heard about that paper in which Mr. Trenchard declared he had only brought ten thousand pounds from India."

"What was that?" asks Alexis, eagerly.

"Well, it was the last night but one before his death. I was going up to bed, after locking my downstairs doors and seeing all the others up before me—even to Podmore,—which was always my way, and as I passed this door about ten minutes, or it might have been a quarter of an hour after the others had gone to bed—for I'd been hunting for our tabby cat, which is a troublesome animal to have prowling about at night, though a good mouser and an affectionate disposition, and I was coming up in the dark, the gas being turned off at the main—when I saw master's door ajar, the door opening on our staircase, you understand. It was just the least bit ajar, leaving a narrow streak of light, and I heard Mr. Pilgrim's voice speaking as I came upstairs, and then I heard master say, 'Now understand clearly, Joel, I must have that money—ten thousand in bank notes—before the wedding. There must be no shilly-shallying. You don't marry my niece till that money is in my hands. No money, no marriage, remember; and the telegram to wind up the business goes to my Calcutta agents on Saturday unless the money is forthcoming.' He had a very sharp, precise way of speaking, poor old gentleman, and I heard every syllable."

A new light flashes on Alexis. This Pilgrim, the odious persecutor of his wife, may not he be the murderer? The idea has presented itself to him before, but he has put it aside for want of any motive to ascribe as the mainspring of the action. But there is motive strong enough supplied in these words of Stephen Trenchard's. This threat to communicate with an agent in Calcutta might mean ruin to Joel Pilgrim. He must have been in some way in Trenchard's power. And to murder Trenchard would be to cut the knot of the difficulty.

Alexis Secretan's heart beats loud and fast. He feels as if he were now on the right track. That there is something mysterious—nay, guilty—in the butler's conduct, he is assured; but the butler may be an accessory before or after the fact, rather than a principal. There is apparent, as yet, no sufficient motive for the butler's guilt; there is an obvious motive if this Pilgrim be the murderer.

"The first thing now to be done is to find out all about this man," thinks Alexis.

"Where is Mr. Pilgrim staying?" he asks. "He has not left the town, has he?"

"No, sir. He is residing at the 'Coach and Horses.' He was to have sailed for India directly after his marriage. That's why things were arranged so sudden. But of course Mr. Trenchard's death altered all that."

"At the 'Coach and Horses,'" says Alexis. "That is where I mean to put up myself."

"You couldn't do better, sir. It's the best hotel in Redcastle."

And now, having accomplished all he can for the time being, Alexis takes leave of Mrs. Skinner.

"I should like to have another look at the pictures before I leave the town," he says. "Perhaps you would not object to my looking round again to-morrow morning?"

"You are freely welcome, sir, as often as you like. When I see that a gentleman *is* a gentleman, I'm very happy to oblige him."

Alexis goes from Lancaster Lodge to the "Coach and Horses," whence he has addressed his telegram to Messrs. Levison and Levison. He is delighted to find a member of that firm waiting for him in the coffee-room, an undersized gentleman, with a smooth sallow face and keen black eyes, thin lips, compressed and horizontal.

"A junior in the house," thinks Alexis, with a look of disappointment. He would have desired age and experience to guide and aid him in this desperate strait. "He looks a shrewd little fellow though, and I dare say he knows his business."

He takes Mr. Levison off to a private room, orders a bottle of dry sherry, and then proceeds to state his case without delay or waste of words.

Mr. Levison listens with quiet intentness, and makes no remark till the story is finished. Even then he is provokingly slow to express himself. He sits looking at Alexis like the head of Memnon, and compels his client to wring his ideas out of him by the closest questioning; and as he pauses for the space of a minute, looking his stoniest, after each question, this process is rather slow.

"Do you think Pilgrim is the man?" asks Alexis.

A long pause. Alexis repeats his question, no gleam of light in Mr. Levison's countenance indicating that the inquiry has been heard.

"If he were the man he could have got away by this time."

Even when Mr. Levison does speak he drops out his words charily through scarcely parted lips, as if they were pearls and diamonds, and he did not like to waste them.

"True. But he might wish to throw people off the scent by remaining."

"Dangerous that. He had ample excuse for going. His Indian voyage was arranged before Mr. Trenchard's death. He only had to carry out the arrangement. There would have been nothing suspicious in that. He is in this house, you say?"

"Yes."

"That's convenient. We can keep an eye upon him."

"I can't see how we are to do that," grumbles Alexis, provoked by his solicitor's phlegmatic tone, "unless we could see through doors or walls. He may leave Redcastle while we are sitting here."

"No, he won't," replies Mr. Levison. "I brought a clerk of mine down with me, and he has got the office to look after Pilgrim."

"But how could you know anything about him till I told you——"

"Do you suppose I waited for you to tell me. That's not our way in Parchment Street. I had a chat with the landlord—heard all about your wife's arrest, and guessed what I was wanted for, heard all the particulars of the murder, or supposed murder, the inquest held in this house, and so on, and gave my man the office."

"And you think that Pilgrim——"

"I never think, Mr. Secretan; I wait for facts. If I squandered my brains upon thought I should have no brain power left to deal with evidence. We shall hear what comes out at the inquest."

Alexis has to take this vague comfort for what it is worth, and make the best of it. He and Mr. Levison dine together, and then Alexis goes back to the jail and spends another half-hour with Sibyl, who is low-spirited, but not so anxious or fearful as she might naturally be in so awful a position.

"Uncle Robert has been here, dear good man," she tells Alexis, "and has been feeling my pulse, and looking at my tongue, and prescribing tonics, and port wine, and beef tea, and all manner of tiresome things. He quite broke down when he saw me here, and burst into tears—the first I ever saw him shed. It gave me more pain to see him than anything that has happened since last night, when I thought you had shut me out of your heart for ever."

"I thought so too, Sibyl; but sorrow has opened the door of my heart and let you in again."

"Ah!" she exclaims, with a little joyful cry, "I thought you could not be long unkind. And you have not forgotten those foolish early days when we walked in Kensington Gardens, and you told the children fairy tales."

"No, love, I have forgotten nothing."

"I will show you something some day, Alex, if ever this dreadful suspicion passes away, and I am free from the charge of murder."

She shudders at the word, and clings to him for a moment like a frightened child.

"What will you show me, dear?"

"A book—such a foolish old book—in which I kept a journal when I first began to care for you. It is all written there, every stupid thing I ever thought about you."

"The rise and fall, the ebb and flow, of love. That must be a precious volume, Sibyl. I would give a great deal to see it."

"You will laugh——"

"I am more likely to cry—remembering how Fate has parted us since then."

CHAPTER LI.

MR. LEVISON CROSS-EXAMINES.

THE inquest is resumed on the following day at eleven, in a room closely packed with eager spectators, among whom the *élite* of Redcastle are to be distinguished. The *élite* are deeply interested in the issue of this inquiry. Have they not taken Sibyl, as it were, to their bosoms, admitted her to those sacred hearths where never lowered the shadow of evil, and is it not incumbent upon her, for their sakes, for their untainted reputes, to clear herself of this hideous charge? Her own shame, her own guilt, her own undeserved agony, if innocent, are of secondary consideration. "She has visited *us!*" cry the *élite.* "How dreadful it will be for us if it turns out that she has poisoned her uncle! People will say they met her in *our* houses. Quite a disgrace to happen to one, dear Mrs. Stormont," says Mrs. Groshen. "Actually humiliating, my dear," replies Mrs. Stormont.

The prevailing opinion in Redcastle is that Sibyl has done the deed. Perhaps had Stephen Trenchard endowed her with a million of money popular feeling might have leaned the other way. It is difficult to suppose that the possessor of a million can err. The property qualification, once necessary to members of Parliament—so many hundred per annum as a pledge of respectability—runs through life. Qualified with a million, no one could have imagined Sibyl a poisoner. But disappointed, deluded, penniless, an abject failure—as much a disappointment to her friends as to herself—Sibyl now appears in the light of a base and insidious schemer, who has well merited the disappointment of her schemes.

And what is this last revelation? asks Redcastle indignantly, when the story of Mr. Secretan's arrival at the jail with his wife gets, no one knows how, into active circulation,—what is this about a husband? What! She has been deceiving us all this time. She has been parading herself in fine dresses, which may never be paid for, she has been spreading her silken train like a peacock's tail, and showing herself off in her false colours as an unmarried woman to the detriment of *our* daughters. She has been exercising her wicked fascinations upon *our* sons. She has flirted with our husbands even, and has taken us all in with her pretended innocence and affected girlishness.

"The husband must be as bad as the wife," says Redcastle and various are the speculations and statements as to Mr Secretan's character.

The inquest begins, and here he is, standing behind his wife's chair as she sits in the place of the accused, the focus of every pitiless eye, eyes that have once looked kindly at her, eyes that have admired. There is Fred Stormont, with his mouth open, standing on tiptoe to look over his father's shoulder, as if he were at a play. Stay, there is one face not quite unpitying. Dr. Mitsand sits yonder near the coroner, grave, watchful, and with a look which Sibyl takes for sympathy.

"Really, a handsome young man," whispers Mrs. Stormont through that thick veil of hers to Mrs. Groshen. "He looks like a gentleman, too."

"Rather the air of an adventurer, I fancy," replies Mrs. Groshen.

The witnesses are examined, and there is much repetition of evidence given on the previous examination. Joel Pilgrim, calm, precise, and faultless of intonation, relates the discovery of Mr. Trenchard's death.

'At what hour had you last seen him alive?" inquires the coroner.

"At ten o'clock on the previous evening, when I bade him good night."

"You had access to him at any hour of the night, I believe?" interposes Mr. Levison.

Joel looks at the questioner somewhat insolently.

"Am I to answer this person's questions?" he inquires of the coroner.

"Yes, so long as they are relevant to the case."

"I don't know what you mean by having access," answers Joel. "Mr. Trenchard's bedroom door was locked. There was a second door, but that opened on a back landing, and was only used by the butler."

"But it was equally convenient for you, had you wanted to see Mr. Trenchard in the night, I think," says Mr. Levison.

"I don't see that," answers Joel, curtly.

"Don't you? Allow me to make the fact clearer to you. Here is a little plan of the landing on the back staircase." He exhibits a sheet of cartridge paper, with a ground plan in pen and ink. "Here are doors numbered 1, 2, 3. No. 1, Mr. Trenchard's bedroom; No. 2, his dressing-room; No. 3, your bedroom. You perceive that from the secondary door of your bedroom to the secondary door of Mr. Trenchard's bedroom is but a step."

"That is right enough, but I never entered Mr. Trenchard's room by that secondary door."

"What, not upon the night but one before the murder, when you had an important conversation with Mr. Trenchard upon financial matters,—a conversation which was overheard by a witness I shall produce by-and-bye—overheard in consequence of your having left that secondary door ajar?"

Mr. Levison looks fixedly at the witness as he asks this question; Mr. Secretan's eyes are also turned upon that tawny countenance, and every eye in the court follows those other eyes. A curious change comes over that dusky complexion of Mr. Pilgrim's. It is not pallor, but rather a deeper tint of olive, which makes him look like a sufferer in an advanced stage of yellow jaundice.

"Did you make use of that secondary door?" asks Levison.

"Never!" replies the witness, resolutely.

"And you have no recollection of that particular conversation?'

"I can recall no particular conversation of the kind. Mr. Trenchard and I had been in business together, and had many conversations upon financial matters."

"Was not some of Mr. Trenchard's capital engaged in your business at the time of his death?"

"Mr. Trenchard took all he could take out of the business when he left Calcutta."

"But he still retained a share in the business, and had a claim to his share of profits arising therefrom?"

"What can my business relations have to do with this inquiry?" exclaims Joel, angrily. "These questions are simply impertinent. We are here to ascertain the cause of Mr Trenchard's death?"

"I beg your pardon," replies Levison, sharply. "Medical evidence has established the cause of death. We are here to find out who killed him,—and to get at the murderer we have to discover the motive. I venture to affirm that no motive can be ascribed to the lady now under arrest."

The name of Levison is such a power in the criminal court that the Redcastle coroner, who might have restricted the inquiries of a lesser man, allows Mr. Levison full licence. The coroner, being a medical man, has not that affection for legal formulas which distinguishes some of his brother officials, and is content to let another man have his share in the development of the case.

Podmore is the next witness examined. He has not forgotten the coroner's reproof, and has brought his mind to as near an approach to sobriety as it is possible for a brain so steeped in alcohol to arrive at on short notice. He gives pretty much the same evidence as he gave on the previous occasion; and of him Mr. Levison asks no questions.

Next comes a witness whose appearance causes a feeling of compunction even in those minds most set against the accused. This is Jane Faunthorpe, who stands before the assembly in her black frock and black straw hat—cheap mourning provided by the parish doctor's scanty purse—with her face paler than it has ever been seen before, and her eyelids swollen with weeping.

She has but one feeling, and that is the conviction that Sibyl is to be hung, and that the hanging will be in some measure her own work. She has not forgotten that speech of her uncle's about her having put a rope round her sister's neck.

She looks at Sibyl piteously, her eyes brimming with tears, and the corners of her mouth remorsefully depressed.

"I can't help it, Sibyl," she whispers. "It isn't my fault."

"Do you know the nature of an oath, my dear?" asks the coroner.

"I know that it is very dreadful, and one mustn't do it," replies the tearful child.

The question is explained to her, and the oath administered, and then comes the ordeal. She is made to tell everything, reluctantly and with many tears. She gives a detailed account of Sibyl's visit to the surgery, and her own remarks about the odour of bitter almonds.

"But I know why she took that horrid stuff," adds Jane. "It wasn't to poison uncle Trenchard, but to poison herself, poor dear thing, and I know why she wanted to poison herself."

"Really, Mr. Coroner," interposes Joel, "if these childish speculations are to be admitted as evidence——"

"'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,'" says the coroner, gravely. "Let the little girl tell us her opinion. It can do no harm."

"I know that Sibyl was very unhappy," pursues Jane, eagerly. "Uncle Trenchard wanted her to marry him," pointing to Joel.

"You must not point at people," says the coroner. "You must tell us whom you mean."

"Well, then, Mr. Pilgrim. Uncle Trenchard wanted her to marry Mr. Pilgrim, and she didn't like him, and couldn't have married him if she had liked him, because she had a husband already, and there he is," pointing to Alexis, "and how he can let his wife be taken up for murder is more than I can understand," concludes Jane, indignantly.

"And you think your sister may have taken that poison with an idea of destroying herself?" inquires the coroner.

"I am almost sure she did."

"When we have done with these expressions of juvenile opinion I suppose we shall pass on to actual evidence?" says Joel, with a sneer.

"You and I are at one as to the object of this inquiry, I hope, Mr. Pilgrim," replies the coroner, gravely.

Mr. Levison asks more questions of Jenny, all tending to show Sibyl's distress of mind at the time of her abstracting the poison, and that this distress was occasioned by her uncle's endeavour to force her into a marriage with his friend.

"It was quite dreadful at the last," says Jane. "Things were to be huddled up anyhow. She was to be married after a few days' notice, without a single bridesmaid, or a wedding dress, or anything, and then to go out to India. And she had a husband already, and so what could she do but poison herself or run away?"

After this, Jenny is dismissed, and retires weeping. On the whole she has made an impression in Sibyl's favour, except upon some of the feminine members of the audience, Mrs. Stormont in particular, who whispers to Mrs. Groshen,—

"That girl is a mass of deception:" to which the banker's wife nods acquiescence, though not very clear as to whether "that girl" means Sibyl or Jenny.

Sibyl keeps her seat meanwhile, pale but very calm. She gives an upward look at her husband now and then in the course of the proceedings, a look that is full of trustful affection, and which goes straight to the heart of Sir Wilford Cardonnel, who surveys the scene from the back of the crowd at the other side of the room. Sir Wilford would give much to be in Mr. Secretan's place, ay, although that awful suspicion hung over his wife. The possibility of Sibyl's guilt has never entered his mind, although Phœbe and Lavinia have been loud in their denunciations, and have gone so far as to say that they saw "secret poisoner" written upon Miss Faunthorpe's countenance while she was staying at the How. Loud will be their self-congratulations and crowings by-and-bye when they hear that this chosen of their brother's was a married woman all the while, and that poor Wilford has been deluded by a designing adventuress. They are not present at this examination. They would not degrade themselves by being interested in this business. It is all very well for the town to be in a fever of curiosity. The county sits aloof amidst its gardens and stables, and poor schools, and vested interests, and can afford to let the topic of the day go by.

After Jenny's examination the coroner adjourns the inquiry, with a view to obtaining additional evidence. But before this adjournment the coroner and Mr. Levison talk confidentially together for some minutes, and it is clear to every one present that the additional evidence will be given by witnesses suggested by Mr. Levison,—witnesses for the defence.

The suspended inquiry closes somewhat abruptly as it seems to the audience, and there is a sense of disappointment at this unfinished condition of things.

Alexis leaves the court full of anxiety, yet more hopeful than he had been before the inquest. He has seen that curious change in Joel Pilgrim's countenance when pressed by Mr. Levison's questions, and he is convinced that Joel Pilgrim is in some manner concerned in the murder.

He accompanies Sibyl back to the jail, and then returns to the hotel to meet his legal adviser, eager to know what Mr. Levison has to say of the day's work.

"Well," he asks as soon as they are closeted together, "what do you think of Joel Pilgrim?"

"I think he did the trick," replies Mr. Levison after one of his long pauses, which are aggravating to a man as anxious as Alexis, "and I think he'll bolt."

"Bolt?"

"Yes. Try to get out of the country. My questions hit him hard. He sees the game is up. The case is simple enough. The old man wanted to wring money out of him, a lump of money, and he was under the old man's thumb in some way. The old man could wind up his business—had a bill of sale or partnership deed that gave him unlimited power, and threatened to crush Pilgrim unless the money was forthcoming. And not being able to get the money, Mr. Pilgrim took the easiest way out of the difficulty by giving his partner a dose of prussic acid."

"He must have known that detection was inevitable."

"I'm not so sure of that. There's a great deal of ignorance in this enlightened age of ours. This man has been brought up in the East, where crime of this kind is commoner and easier than it is here. He may not be very well posted in English law or English customs. He may have thought that in a sleepy little town like this Redcastle no inquiry would have been made as to the cause of an old man's death. He was ailing and he died, and there an end; or he may have thought that the death would have been put down to suicide; or, supposing him to be a very bad lot, he may have intended from the outset to lay the crime at your wife's door. He knew of her possession of that prussic acid."

"How do you know that?"

"From her own lips, when I talked this matter over with her half an hour before the inquest. She had shown him the bottle of poison, and threatened to kill herself if he molested her with such attentions as he might have thought he had a right to pay to his affianced wife. She let him know that she had the poison in her possession, and then in the hurry of her flight she forgot the existence of the bottle, and left it, she does not remember where. It was found in her work-basket, where no doubt he put it when he had used its contents."

"Might not just the same thing have been done by Podmore?"

"How was Podmore to know that your wife had that bottle in her possession? or granted that he did know it, I don't see his motive."

"Servants have murdered their masters for the sake of plunder, or to come into the possession of a legacy."

"True, but I don't think Podmore is the man. I have had the two men under my eye, and have taken my measure of both."

"What are we to do if Pilgrim makes a bolt?"

"Stop him. I've taken measures for that already. I telegraphed to Scotland Yard for a man I can depend upon. He came down by the first train this morning, and Mr. Pilgrim is under that man's surveillance. He'll play with him as a clever angler plays with his fish, and if it's to be done, he'll land him. But we want the bolt to be decided, we want Pilgrim to throw up the sponge. An attempt to get away may help us to fix him with the fact, for you see the case is a very difficult one. We have to get that prussic acid bottle, known to be in your wife's possession, transferred to the hands of Pilgrim. It's not enough for us to show that there was sufficient motive for his putting the old man out of the way, we must show that he actually did the deed."

"I don't see how it is to be done," says Alexis despondingly.

"No more do I, just at present."

"Do you think the jury were favourably impressed as regards my wife by to-day's examination?"

"Well, yes; I should say rather favourably than otherwise. Your wife is very handsome, you see, and beauty has a great influence upon juries. Then that little girl's evidence, though it was awkward as to the possession of the poison, was good in some points. Children are capital witnesses if you work them carefully. They always excite sympathy. The little girl suggested a motive for Mrs. Secretan's securing the poison—suicide—persecuted, unprotected, and so on. That idea fits in with her flight from Redcastle. Yes, I think on the whole the little girl's evidence was good."

It is seven o'clock by this time, and Mr. Levison is ready for his dinner, a substantial fact in the day which he is not inclined to ignore, even though a client's life and fair name tremble in the balance. The two gentlemen dine together, Alexis too anxious to eat, a condition of things which Mr. Levison severely reproves.

"If you want to see your wife safely through this business you must begin by taking care of yourself, Mr. Secretan," says the lawyer, helping himself to a second supply of fish. "This salmon is the finest I have ever eaten in this part of England. Try a little bit of the back."

But salmon cannot tempt Alexis, who is full of anxieties this evening.

The post has just brought a letter from Dick, enclosing another from Linda Challice, and telling him that the little boy has arrived at the Grange.

"He's a dear little fellow," writes Dick, "but he frets a good deal about Miss Challice, and it's as much as the maid-servant and I can do to comfort him. We've found a pony for him, and we are teaching him to ride up and down the meadow, which we find very consoling. He laughs and enjoys himself very much during the ride, but when it is all over he still cries for mammie. I am afraid that in the process of consolation we have given him rather more strawberries and other fruit than may be quite advisable. I dare say when you come back he will speedily reconcile himself to his new home. He is to go and see grand-papa Benfield on Sunday afternoon. Miss Challice has gone to the south of France on a sketching tour. I dare say she has told you all about it in her letter."

This is rather startling news to receive at such a time. His boy at home, Linda gone. He hastens to read her letter.

"DEAR MR. SECRETAN,

"A little quiet reflection has convinced me that you, and you alone, have a right to the custody of my darling Trot. Providence brought him to our home. Providence brought you there to claim your own. What can I wish for him better than a happy home and his father's love? Parting with him is a wrench that must almost break my heart, but the pain would be just the same let the parting come when it might. Knowing this, I have made up my mind to give him up at once, and send him to you this day.

"In order that I may not feel the loss of my darling quite so keenly as I must feel it if I stayed in the home that he has brightened, I have determined to go abroad for a short time. I am going to Cannes, to an old lady, an aunt of my father's, who keeps a boarding-house there. I shall be enabled to practise my favourite art of landscape painting among strange scenes, and the change will be altogether an advantage to me. Of course you will understand that I shall not stay too long away from my dear old grandfather.

"Good-bye, dear Mr. Secretan; may my darling Trot be as happy as I wish him, and a source of unfailing happiness to you. I shall expect to see him grown quite a big boy when I come back to Dorley.

"Very sincerely yours,
"LINDA CHALLICE."

Alexis folds up the letter with a sigh. So ends his brief romance of Dorley Mill. That Linda has been dearer to him than she should have been he knows but too well. That her heart has been touched by some feeling warmer than pity for a helpless invalid he more than half suspects; but he has never harboured one dishonourable feeling, he has never cherished one guilty wish, and he feels that in thus leaving Dorley for a little while Linda has shown herself as wise as she is good. Pity for his wife's most pitiable condition has strangled that unpermitted love in its birth. He can think of Linda now with a pathetic tenderness hardly akin to pain, as of one he has loved and lost long ago.

He answers Dick's letter before he leaves the hotel, and gives him a string of directions about Trot. The things that are to be done, and the things that are to be left undone. No mother writing about her firstborn could be more careful. He posts this letter himself on his way to the jail.

He spends a quiet hour with Sibyl, but says not a word about his boy. He cannot bring himself to talk of Trot within those walls. It will be time enough when Sibyl is free from this horrible suspicion, and he can take her to Cheswold Grange.

CHAPTER LII.

THE PODMORES THINK OF EMIGRATION.

It is nine o'clock when Alexis leaves the prison, the latest hour to which he can, by any stretch of authority, be allowed to remain. It is a moonless night, with a drizzling rain, and the road is wet and muddy.

In going back to the "Coach and Horses" he has to pass Lancaster Lodge, and here something arrests his attention. It is a cab loaded with boxes standing before the lodge gate. He sees this vehicle from a little way off, and it has driven through the Bar before he reaches the lodge door.

He rings the bell sharply.

"Who is that just gone away in a cab?" he asks.

"Mr. Podmore, sir, the butler," answers the woman at the lodge.

"Do you know where he is going?"

"To the railway station, sir."

"Yes, of course. But where afterwards?"

"I don't know for certain, sir, but I think I heard Mrs. Podmore—she came to pack her husband's things—make mention of Liverpool. I believe it's his 'ome, sir."

"But his wife and children lived in this town, didn't they? What do you mean by Liverpool being his home?"

"Yes, sir, they lived here, Podmore being in service here, but they was only lodgers. I believe Liverpool is his 'ome when he is at 'ome."

"When does the train go?"

"At half-past nine, sir."

"And where can I get a cab?"

"None nearer than the 'Coach and Horses.'"

"Thanks."

Alexis looks at his watch. There is just time for him to walk the distance at his fastest, and he would rather trust his own legs than wait for a fly to be got ready at the "Coach and Horses," always a slow business. He is at the station just as the bell rings. The platform is clear, no sign of Podmore or Podmore's family. Alexis runs along by the side of the carriages, catches a glimpse of the Podmore household, almost snowed up in bandboxes and bundles, in a second-class compartment, and then jumps into a carriage himself, calling to a porter to get his ticket. There is no time to get a ticket, and Alexis has to defer that operation till the next station. He is hardly in the carriage when the train starts. At Krampston he sees the Podmore troop struggling on the platform, a slatternly woman in a trailing shawl with a frowsy bonnet hanging to the back of her head, two barelegged children hanging to the long shawl, Podmore, hurried and excited, trying to do two things at once—namely, to look after his luggage, and to inquire what train he is to take for Liverpool.

"Ten fifteen," gasps a guard, without looking at the enquirer, "second platform on the right, change at Wandlethorpe, change at Spilbury."

Alexis hears this, and follows the Podmore party at a respectful distance. He waits to see Podmore take tickets for Liverpool, sees him and his belongings safely shipped in another second-class compartment, both children crying, and Mrs. Podmore frantic about a missing bandbox, and then he hurries to the telegraph office and sends the following message to Mr. Levison at the "Coach and Horses," Redcastle :—

"Podmore is off to Liverpool with family. This looks like a bolt. I am after him. Telegraph your instructions to the Washington Hotel."

This done, Mr. Secretan takes a second-class ticket for Liverpool, and gets into the compartment adjoining that occupied by the Podmores, whence come sounds of infantine wailing and wifely remonstrance, and the husky tones of Podmore as if in pacification of these avenging spirits.

Wandlethorpe Junction at midnight is about as dismal a place as a student of the hideous need care to behold. It is on the bank of an inky canal, and coal barges and railway trucks seem to be mixed up in hopeless entanglement. Huge cranes stand up in iron ugliness against night's purple sky. Sidings run off at impossible angles, and unknown lines dip under bridges as if they would take the traveller into the bowels of the earth. Lights are sparsely sprinkled on the gloom, and what lamps there are have a lurid glare, suggestive of the under world.

Solitary engines block the anxious traveller's way, and snort defiance at him from their sonorous throats, as he tries to cross the labyrinth of iron rails. The soil is coal-dust, and the atmosphere smoke. In the horrible deeps of that infernal world which Dante saw in his midway of life, this last and lowest horror of a railway junction in the coal districts was wanting.

Here, on a dark platform, Alexis is able to keep pretty close to the Podmore family, who are too much occupied with their own affairs to perceive that they are watched. Podmore consoles himself with a tumbler of hot gin and water at the refreshment counter, and gives the same balm to his wife ; while the children, with solemn sleepy faces, resolutely gnaw their way through buns of the most indigestible order.

There is half an hour to wait at Wandlethorpe, and then a journey of an hour in the slowest of trains, through a coaly district, on the border of a canal, brings them to Spilbury, where they arrive in a chilly hour on the edge of night, and where they have again to wait for another train to take them on to Liverpool.

It is gray morning when they arrive at that busy port, having wasted more time at junctions than the actual journey has occupied, and having spent more time altogether in the transit than would have been required for a journey from Liverpool to London.

The Podmore family have a weary look as they select their belongings from the heterogeneous contents of the luggage van. The elder child reposes on his father's shoulder, the head of the younger infant hangs helplessly across the mother's arm.

"When does the *Horonoker* sail?" asks Podmore of a porter.

"'Merican steamer. Inquire at the office."

"I hope we're in time," says Mrs. Podmore to her lord. "If we are to go, the sooner we sail the better. We shan't do no good dragging about here, spending money in a strange place."

"*Oronoko*," says a man of seafaring aspect, who has just possessed himself of a huge green chest, "*Oronoko* for New York? You'd best look sharp if you're going in her, mate; she sails at ten o'clock this morning."

"Ten o'clock?" echoes Podmore, "then there's time enough to get a bit of breakfast, anyhow."

"And I'm that faint I'm ready to drop," adds his wife, plaintively. "Such dragging about as we've gone through, I never did. I feel as if I'd been travellin' for a week at a stretch—and as dizzy in my poor head——"

"Hold your jaw!" says Podmore, sternly; "there never was such a woman to whine. You're wuss than the childring."

Podmore arranges with a porter for the conveyance of his boxes, inquires for a decent coffee-house at which he may breakfast, and then leaves the station, his wife straggling after him, clutching a child with one arm, and a bandbox with the other, and trailing her gown through the Liverpudlian mud, which is a compound *sui generis*, and a little worse than anything to be found at the east end of London.

Alexis follows the family party to a side street near the station, and into a coffee-house, in whose dusky window three empty breakfast cups, a stale muffin, two yellow-looking eggs, and a plate of watercress are suggestive of the temperate refreshment to be obtained within.

Mr. Podmore is just seating himself at a table in a corner, when Alexis taps him on the shoulder.

"I think you'd better have a private room, Mr. Podmore," he says, "for I want a little chat with you while you are eating your breakfast."

Podmore stares with a bewildered air.

"Did you ring, sir?" he asks, and then recalling his scattered senses, "I beg your pardon, sir, I haven't the honour of your acquaintance."

"Oh yes, you have, Mr. Podmore, and you'll know more of me before we've done with each other. Waiter, can we have a private room?" asks Alexis, appealing to a sleepy youth in a white apron, who is making a good deal of unnecessary clatter with some cups and saucers in the endeavour to keep himself awake.

"Yes, sir, convenient room upstairs, families and private parties. This way, sir."

"Now then, Mr. Podmore," says Alexis.

"But really!" remonstrates Podmore.

Alexis half pushes him up the stairs, following close upon his heels. The wife follows, dragging her children after her. When they are all safe inside the room, Alexis turns to the waiter and whispers,—

"Go and fetch the cleverest police officer in Liverpool, and let him wait outside this door till I want him. I'll take care of you if you look sharp about it."

"I'm fly," answers the youth, brightening at the prospect of excitement and remuneration. "Case of 'bezzlement, I suppose, sir? I'll get you the right kind of man in a quarter of an hour, if you can keep your party quiet till then."

"Ham and eggs and coffee for four," says Alexis, aloud, as he enters the private room—a musty den redolent of the meals that have been consumed within the last month. The atmosphere without not being much purer than the atmosphere within, opening the window to admit fresh air is but a choice of evils.

"Now, sir," says Podmore, plucking up his spirit, and assuming a defiant air, "may I ask by what authority you take me and my family in hand, and order us up to this here room——"

"For which we shall have to pay hextra," interjects Mrs. Podmore, shrill with indignation.

"And ordering of our breakfastes."

"'Am and eggs is no choice of mine," protests Mrs. Podmore. "If they're in, I would rather have a Yarmouth bloater."

"Who are you, sir, may I ask, to take all this upon yourself?" inquires Podmore, finally.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Podmore. I am the husband of a lady you know something about; a lady you have known as Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe. That lady has been accused most unjustly of being concerned in the murder of her uncle, and what I am here to do is to find the murderer."

"You won't find him here," shrieks Mrs. Podmore; at which maternal outburst the two children set up their loudest wail, the youngest crying his hardest with all his fingers in his mouth, and his innocent nose streaming sympathetically.

"I don't know anything about the murderer," says Podmore, doggedly.

"Oh yes, you do," replies Alexis, resolutely. "You know so much that you are either a principal or an accomplice. That is why you have left Redcastle, stealthily, under cover of night, although bound to appear as a witness at the adjourned inquest. That is why you are on your way to America. And let me tell you, Mr. Podmore, that an accessory before the fact is a principal; and that if you knew that this deed was to be done, and stood by while it was done——"

"I didn't. I didn't know it. I was as innocent as that baby there."

"Then why have you tried to get away? Come, Mr. Podmore, if your share in this work is not that of a principal, if you can clear yourself from actual participation in the crime, or consent to it, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it. Help me to prove my wife's innocence, and I'll stand your friend through thick and thin."

"I may have better friends than you," grumbles Podmore, with a dogged air,—"friends as willing to help me, and better able to do it."

"Yes," cries Alexis at a venture, "such a friend as Mr. Pilgrim, who gave you the money to go to New York, who wants to get you out of the way, who poisoned Stephen Trenchard with your knowledge and consent."

The bow drawn at a venture has sent its shaft home. Alexis can see that in the butler's face. Mrs. Podmore sits by open eyed, open-mouthed, horror depicted in her countenance. Whatever the butler's secret may be, it is evident that his wife has not shared it.

"Not with my knowledge, nor yet with my consent," cries Podmore, affrightedly.

"But he did it, and you knew that he did it,—after the fact, perhaps, in which case you'd better turn Queen's evidence. Come, Mr. Podmore, your only chance lies in candour. This attempt to get away from the country is in itself enough to condemn you. You had access to your master all through the night. You gave him his medicine. Who so likely as you to have given the fatal dose? Come, I have a police officer waiting outside this door with a warrant for your arrest."

"Run and look outside, Liz; this here's only bluster," says Podmore; but before his wife can reach the door Alexis has turned the key and put it into his pocket.

"Neither you nor your wife leave this room till you've told me all you know about Stephen Trenchard's death."

"Podmore," cries the wife, distractedly, "what have you been and done? What disgrace and trouble have you gone and brought on your innocent wife and children? This is all along of drink, Podmore. I always said you'd bring us to the workhouse, but I didn't suppose you'd bring yourself to the scaffold."

"Hold your noise, you lunatical idiot!" roars Podmore. "I've done nothing to bring me to harm, but I may know somethink about them that have."

"Remember that to help or comfort a murderer, or to conceal his crime, is to become an accessory after the fact, Mr. Podmore," says Alexis.

"Tell what you know, Podmore, and clear yourself," cries the wife, clasping her hands. "Clear yourself, and clear your innocent wife and children. I never did like the looks of this sudden scuffling of us off to New York. It's all very well to emigrant, but I like to emigrant at my leisure. Not a thing fit to put on me or the children is there in them boxes, and not so much as a bottle of Daffy for baby. A nice thing to have this blessed innocent in convulsions with his teeth on board ship, and me that seasick I couldn't do nothink for him."

"Hold your tongue, Liza," exclaims the ex-butler, testily. "Come, now," he says, turning to Alexis, "if I tell what I've got to tell am I to be kept clear of the law?"

"Yes, if it's in my power, or in the power of Levison and Levison to clear you."

"And what am I to get for standing by you, and helping you to clear your wife—Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe that was."

"Everything."

"That ain't definite enough for me. I want five hundred pounds to set me up in the public line. Hang New York! I ain't going to be pitched and tossed across the Atlantic if I can get myself comfortably provided for at home. Give me a written undertaking to pay me five hundred pounds if I get your wife clear off. Take me round to a lawyer's office, and do it all in legal form *scundem hartem*, as a master of mine used to say, and I'll go back to Redcastle with you and bear the brunt of having kept something back as I ought to have told. I expect I shall get a twelvemonth for it, but I shan't so much mind that if I've got a snug bit of capital to fall back upon."

"Podmore!" shrieks the wife.

"You shan't go to prison if Levison and Levison can get you off scot-free," says Alexis. "And now we'd better get back to Redcastle as fast as we can, and the agreement can be drawn up there by Mr. Levison."

"Oh, come now, when you've got me back you won't care about the agreement. I'm not such a fool as to walk into a trap of that sort."

"If you don't come of your own free will, you'll have to come in custody," replies Alexis, firmly. "It wasn't an empty threat of mine about the police officer. He's outside."

He has heard a firm foot on the stair. He turns the key, opens the door a little way, and looks out. Yes, there stands the officer, steady as a rock.

"The gentleman outside is ready to take you into custody, Podmore," says Alexis, "unless you accept my offer and come back quietly with me. As a proof of good faith, I am prepared to hand you fifty pounds, on account of the five hundred."

He produces his purse and takes out a bank note for fifty pounds. He had written to his bankers for a supply of ready cash on the day of his arrival at Redcastle, knowing that the sinews of war would be needed at this juncture.

The sight of the crisp new note, and of the officer waiting outside, has a wonderful effect upon Podmore. He looks at his wife dubiously, contemplates his children, whose tears have been dried by their mother's judicious administration of peppermint rock, and who are now engaged in looking out of the window, and printing impressions of their sticky paws upon the dingy glass.

"I don't want to go to New York, no more don't she," he says, with a jerk of his head towards his wife; "but we've sent all our traps on board, and it 'll be very awkward——"

"All awkwardness can be got over by the expenditure of a pound or two. Here are five sovereigns for Mrs. Podmore. She can see to the recovery of the luggage, and bring it back to Redcastle by a later train. We had better catch the next that starts."

The golden coin has a pacifying effect upon Mrs. Podmore's nerves. She takes the sovereigns up one by one, and turns them over, rings them on the table, and finally engulfs them in a greasy-looking leather purse.

Podmore is thoughtful, but consentient. Alexis says a few words to the officer, and that functionary accompanies Mr. Secretan and his charge to the railway station, sees them comfortably into their carriage, and there leaves them, satisfied with the modest honorarium which Alexis slips into his palm at the last moment.

The train once started, Alexis feels quite capable of dealing with Mr. Podmore single-handed.

CHAPTER LIII.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL.

THE adjourned inquiry is again resumed before the coroner, two days after the return of Alexis from Liverpool, with his companion the butler, whom he has contrived to keep snugly hidden under Robert Faunthorpe's roof, where Podmore, his wife and children, have been boarded and lodged, and kept in custody by the faithful Hester, who watches her charges as a cat watches a mouse.

"Remember you are not one of you to put so much as your noses out of doors till I come for you, says Alexis, impressively; "not a creature in Redcastle is to know of your return till the right moment!"

"As long as I have my meals regular I'm satisfied," replies Podmore, "I never was a prowler about the streets."

So the Podmore family occupy the kitchen at Dr. Faunthorpe's, and no one outside the doctor's house knows anything about these extra inmates.

Alexis and Mr. Levison have crossed each other on the railroad, and that gentleman has returned from a bootless journey to the “Washington,” considerably out of temper. He has reconciled himself, however, to this wasted expedition in finding what his client has done.

Joel Pilgrim is still at the “Coach and Horses,” where he lives well, and seems to enjoy life. He plays billiards and makes himself eminently agreeable to the youth of Redcastle, Fred Stormont included; but he complains loudly of his detention in the town, on account of this sad business of his old friend's mysterious death, while his own affairs need his presence in Calcutta.

“This dawdling old coroner may drag the inquiry out for the next month,” he says, “and at last arrive at the conclusion that my poor friend was poisoned by some person or persons unknown. I don't see that there's evidence enough to bring the crime home to that poor girl, and it seems a hard thing that a young and lovely woman should be placed in such a position.”

Frederick sighs, and shakes his head, and shrugs his shoulders.

“It is hard,” he says, “and I've positively worshipped that girl, you know—devoted myself to her quite awfully. And now to find that there was a husband in the background all the while. Shows a want of candour, you know.”

“Proves an artful disposition certainly,” replies Mr. Pilgrim, “but if every artful young woman took to disposing of people with prussic acid there'd be an alarming decrease in the population.”

“True,” says Fred. “Well, I'm sure I hope she didn't do it, poor thing. But I'm sorry to say the opinion of the town is against her.”

He says this with an air which implies that to be condemned by public opinion in Redcastle is to have received sentence from a supreme tribunal, and to be found guilty at a bar from which there is no court of appeal.

“I really feel for her, you know,” says Fred, as he prostrates himself upon the green cloth to aim at a distant ball, “but the town thinks badly of the case. She had the poison in her possession, you know, and she ran away, you know. It's difficult to avoid making four out of two such twos.”

“Looks suspicious, certainly,” replies Mr. Pilgrim.

“As far as the running away goes, she might have done that to avoid marrying you, certainly,” says Fred, reflectively.

“That would have been a very childish proceeding,” answers Joel; “she had only to tell me the truth, and all question of marriage would have been at an end.”

“But women do odd things sometimes, you know. They're apt to get wrong in their heads when they're frightened.”

“I don't think Sibyl is that sort of girl; she must have been a very cool hand to come here to her uncle—the wife of a man whose name he detested, and pass herself off as a single woman, and play her cards to inherit a fortune.”

"True," says Frederick, despondently, and his opinion of Sibyl is a little worse than it was before Mr. Pilgrim undertook her defence.

It is just possible that Mr. Pilgrim would not remain at Redcastle quite so patiently were it not for a suspicion on his part that a certain shabby little man in black, who hangs about the public rooms of the hotel, and spends a good deal of his time in the hall and porch, and contrives always to be in the way when Mr. Pilgrim goes out, nay, even happens to have business or pleasure that takes him exactly the same way, has been set as a watch upon somebody's movements, and that any attempt to hasten his intended journey to Calcutta might be attended with unpleasant consequences. Whatever perils may surround Mr. Pilgrim's path will be best overcome by a calm adherence to his present policy, or at least so argues that gentleman; and he quietly awaits the conclusion of the examination in which his evidence is required.

On this bright summer morning the same crowd is again gathered in the well-known assembly-room—a room famous for town and county balls, for concerts, and fancy fairs, and other local festivities, but affording a scene of more absorbing interest to-day than the most aristocratic of dances or charity bazaars.

Mrs. Stormont is there again, with her constant ally Mrs. Groshen, wearing the same veils and bonnets, and seated in the same sheltered corner near the reporter's table. There is Mr. Levison sitting near the Coroner, with that Memnon's head of his, stony and inexpressive, but certainly not given to melodious breathings at sunrise or any other time. There sits Sibyl, pale as marble, and calm as a statue, her husband standing behind her chair.

To-day there are fresh witnesses to be examined—so runs the rumour, and there is an eager curiosity about these new witnesses and the evidence they may give.

The first witness called is Bathsheba Skinner, spinster, lately cook and housekeeper in the employment of the deceased.

"What can that woman have to say about the case?" mutters Joel Pilgrim to Colonel Stormont, who is standing next him.

"Not much, I should think, unless she poisoned him in one of her curries," replies the colonel; "doocid good curries they were."

Bathsheba Skinner is sworn, and stands up before the assembly, vinegar-faced, but eminently respectable, with black kid gloves, a trifle too long in the fingers, on her industrious hands, and a pictorial brooch a little smaller than a cheese-plate clasping her rusty black lace shawl.

"You were in the habit of preparing all nourishment that was taken up to Mr. Trenchard's room;" says the coroner after a few preliminary questions, "broths, arrowroot, and so on."

"Yes, sir, I did it all with my own hands. There was many things I might have left to the kitchen maid, but I felt it was my duty to see to it myself. There was not a thing in the way of beef tea, or jelly, or tapioca, or arrowroot that went up to Mr. Trenchard which was not prepared by my own hands."

"And are you sure that nothing of a poisonous nature entered into any of these things?"

"As sure as I am that I'm alive, sir."

"Come, you may have used essences to flavour your jelly, or your tapioca. Essential oil of almonds, or at any rate essence of almonds That is a favourite flavouring with cooks, and a dangerous one Didn't you use essence of almonds to flavour Mr. Trenchard's jelly?"

"I hadn't a drop in the house, sir. I never have held with such stuff. When I want almond flavouring I use the best Jordans at two shillings a pound, but I know my business better than to use almond flavouring of any kind for an invalid. Invalid cookery can't be too simple."

"You did not even use bitter almonds, or ratafia, peach kernels, or anything of that kind?"

"No, sir."

"You slept on the same floor as Podmore, the butler, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, my room was next to his."

"Did you hear anything remarkable, any unusual stir or movement,—in short, anything at all out of the common course in Podmore's room or on the stairs leading to Podmore's room during the night of your master's death?"

"Well, sir, I did hear something which struck me at the time as curious, and yet it might mean nothing. I mentioned it afterwards to Podmore, and he put me down——"

"You mustn't tell us what you said to Podmore, or how he answered you. That isn't evidence. We want to know what you heard on the night of the 23rd of June."

"Well, sir, I am a light sleeper at all times, and perhaps I was extra wakeful on that night on account of the wedding that was fixed for next day. It was to be quite a quiet wedding, and there was no breakfast ordered, but I'd cooked a tongue and a pair of fowls, and made a jelly and a cream or two, and boiled a bit of salmon for a mayonnaise, and got everything in order to put a pretty little luncheon on the table, and the fag and worry of that had over-tired me, so that I got very little sleep. It was broad daylight, and I was just dropping off, when I heard Podmore get up and go down stairs in his creaky slippers. 'He's gone down to give master his medicine,' says I to myself; "I won't try to go to sleep no more till he comes up again or else he'll be startling me just as I'm dropping off comfortable again. He won't be gone above five minutes.' Well, I waited and waited but instead of being gone five minutes as usual, it was a good half-hour before Podmore came upstairs again."

"Did you look at your watch?" asks a precise juryman.

"Lor, no, sir, but I can guess a half-hour as well as any one. I've got into the way of it over my roasting; a good cook known the value of time. It was a full half-hour before Podmore came up, and then he came up ever so slowly, holding to the baluster, and his footstep was as heavy as lead. And when he got into his room he flung himself down on his bed, and gave a groan. 'What was the matter with you last night?' I asked him at breakfast-time. At first he didn't seem as if he understood what I meant, but when I told him I'd heard him groaning, he said he'd had an attack of spasms, and he'd been down to the pantry to look for some mustard for a poultice. I didn't think much more of it after that, and an hour later the house was all upset by my master's death. But I've thought of it since many times."

"Do you know what time it was when Podmore went down stairs?"

"It was a few minutes after five. I'd heard the stable clock strike a little before. And I took particular notice on account of its being just an hour late for Mr. Trenchard's medicine, for four o'clock was the hour at which he ought to have took it."

"There was nothing else you remarked that night."

"No, sir."

"I think that will do."

"I beg your pardon," interposes Mr. Levison, "I should like to ask the witness one or two questions.—Pray will you be kind enough, Mrs. Skinner, to tell the jury of a conversation which you heard outside Mr. Trenchard's door on the last evening but one before his death?"

"I did certainly overhear a conversation, sir."

"What can any such conversation, or any eavesdropping whatever, have to do with the question at issue," cries Joel Pilgrim, livid with anger or fear. The change in his countenance is noticed by every one, just as the less marked change during the last examination was noticed by a few.

"We shall see how far the conversation is relevant, sir," replies the coroner, "when Mrs. Skinner has answered Mr. Levison's question."

"I did hear a conversation, sir, between my master and Mr. Pilgrim," says Mrs. Skinner, with a vindictive look at Joel, "but I was not eavesdropping. I've lived too long in the best of families to be an eavesdropper, or to be suspected of being such by any gentleman calling himself a gentleman. What I heard that night I heard promiscuous, and I stayed to hear no more than reached my ears promiscuous as I went past Mr. Trenchard's door."

Mrs. Skinner goes on to relate the conversation which she had described to Alexis on his visit to Lancaster Lodge.

"Gentlemen," cries Joel, vehemently, "this is an abominable fabrication, prompted by some hidden influence. No such conversation took place. My——Mr. Trenchard held no such threat over me. Mrs. Skinner must have been a long time crossing the landing to hear all this, gentlemen of the jury. I tell you that she could not have heard it in that time, she did not hear it at any time; but she invented it, or it has been invented for her——"

"Mr. Pilgrim, I really cannot allow this," says the coroner.

"You will better appreciate Mr. Pilgrim's warmth when you have heard the next witness," says Mr. Levison.

A faint flush of colour warms Sibyl's marble cheek. She feels as if light were coming swiftly through the gloom. Her husband has told her nothing, except to trust in Providence and in him. She has so trusted, and those quiet monotonous days in Redcastle jail are the most peaceful days she has known since she fled from Dixon Street and poverty more than three years ago.

Joel Pilgrim looks intently to the other end of the room, watching for the appearance of that witness of whom Mr. Levison has spoken. He starts, and the leaden hue of his countenance takes a more death-like shade when some one calls "Joseph Podmore!"

Podmore advances to the little railed-off space which has been made for the witnesses. He is very pale, and is evidently nervous; but he is perfectly sober.

"Now, Mr. Podmore," says Levison, when a few questions, chiefly repetitive, have been asked by the coroner, "will you be good enough to state what happened within your knowledge on the night of Mr. Trenchard's death?"

The ex-butler rubs his hands nervously, looks round the assembly, shifts his balance from one foot to the other, coughs dubiously, and then begins,—

"Gentlemen of the jury, and your worship, I am about to make a statement which I ought to have made before. It has preyed upon my mind havin' kep' it back; but I am a pore man, with a young family dependent upon my exertions in service. I was ackshally on my way to New York, gentlemen of the jury and your honour, and had got as far on my voyage as Liverpool, when the facks in question preyed upon my mind to that degree that I felt that I must come back to this town to reveal them. I hope this will plead in my favour, your worship and gentlemen of the jury, if there is any irregularity in my not having made this revelation sooner."

"The man is drunk or mad!" cries Joel, savagely.

"The man is sober to-day, Mr. Pilgrim," says the coroner. "Go on, Mr. Podmore."

"The statement I have to make relates to the night of my master's death, the night of June 23rd. I was an hour late, gentlemen, on that night in going downstairs to give my master his medicine. I had slep' extra heavy, and it was five o'clock instead of four when I woke. I went down as usual. The house was very quiet; but I took notice that the door of Mr. Pilgrim's bedroom—the secondary door opening on to the landing—stood ajar. So, thinks I, Mr. Pilgrim is with my master, perhaps he has given the old gentleman his medicine. I wasn't so much surprised as I might have been at Mr. Pilgrim being astir so early, for he always was early. It was one of his Indian ways. Well, gentlemen of the jury, I goes to my master's door, and when I puts my hand against it, the door opens a little way, without any noise; for the locks at Lancaster Lodge are old-fashioned box locks, and the catches give way, so that half your time though a door looks to be shut it's not really fastened. The door gave way to my hand, and I looked in. Mr. Trenchard was sitting up in bed, and Mr. Pilgrim was opening a bottle of soda water on the dressing-table. I saw him pour some of the soda water into a tumbler, and then I saw him, quick as lightning, pour something out of a bottle in his other hand. As I live, gentlemen of the jury, it didn't strike me at that moment that there was any harm. I thought it was some kind of medicine or drops, like choraldyne, or choral, or some of those new-fangled oppiates, and I didn't feel myself called on to interfere. There was no time for me to turn it over in my mind, you see; there wasn't a moment between Mr. Pilgrim's pouring the stuff into the glass and his handing the glass to my master. Mr. Trenchard drank it off at a draught. It weren't above a third of a bottle of soda water. He sat for an instant bolt upright, his eyes straining out of his head and glassy; then he gave one long gasp, and fell back on his pillow purple in the face, as if you'd clutched him by the throat and strangled him. I rushed into the room, and lifted him up in my arms. I thought at first he was in a fit; but when I stooped over him I smelt a sharp strong smell like bitter almonds, and then I knew it was prussic acid. 'What have you given him?' I asked. But Mr. Pilgrim made no answer. 'You've killed him,' I said, and then he told me that it was accident. He had taken the wrong bottle. He had taken a bottle of prussic acid which Mr. Trenchard kept in his medicine-chest, among other drugs, instead of choral. He seemed in a dreadful state of mind. I couldn't help feeling for him. Who could tell whether it wasn't accident? and, if it was, anybody might have found themselves in the same position."

"Spare us your reflections, if you please," says the coroner. "Had your master any medicine-chest in his room?"

"Yes, there was a small box, with about half a dozen bottles in partitions."

"Do you know one of these bottles to have contained prussic acid in any form whatever?"

"I can't say that I do, your worship. There was hartshorn, and caddleput oil, and tincter of rhubub, and such like."

"You have named three bottles out of the half-dozen," says the coroner.

Mr. Levison whispers into his ear.

"Yes, that would be best," says the coroner, and he beckons one of the men in attendance and despatches him on some errand.

"Did Mr. Pilgrim offer you money to hold your tongue about what you had seen?" asks the coroner.

Podmore fences with this question for a little, but ends by confessing that Joel Pilgrim did offer him money; that he gave him twenty pounds on the spot, and promised to provide for him hereafter. He further admits that Joel had instigated him to emigrate to America, and had given him neither rest nor peace till he had made all arrangements for his departure. Mr. Pilgrim had paid his passage on board the *Oronoko.*

By the time this question is settled the man who has been sent out by the coroner returns, carrying a small mahogany case, with brass plates at the corners, an old-fashioned case divided into six compartments, each containing a small square bottle of very thick glass.

These bottles the coroner takes out one by one, examines them, and exhibits them to the jury. The six bottles contain hartshorn, sal volatile, opium, tincture of rhubarb, cajeput oil, and syrup of squills.

Each bottle is carefully labelled with a label in Stephen Trenchard's handwriting pasted on the glass.

"Gentlemen," says the coroner, "I think we have now arrived at a stage in this inquiry when a further adjournment will be necessary. It will be as well to give time for the inquiry which is going on before the magistrate."

There is a little consultation, and the jury are dismissed.

White to the very lips, Joel Pilgrim turns to Colonel Stormont with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

"Was there ever anything so absurd as the manner of this inquiry?" he asks. "There is actually a premium offered for perjury! This man, Secretan, has had ample time to bribe any number of false witnesses. What more easy than for him to get up this story, and pay the housekeeper and butler for perjuring themselves?"

Colonel Stormont makes no reply. He feels rather uncomfortable in Mr. Pilgrim's neighbourhood after the butler's evidence. The story may be a tissue of lies, woven by Sibyl's husband; but, on the other hand, it is as likely to be true—and that dark face of Joel Pilgrim's tells strange tales.

There is a general move towards the door. Mr. Pilgrim is about to pass out with the rest, when a hand is laid upon his shoulder, and Mr. Judbury, the detective officer, takes possession of him.

"What do you mean by this?" asks Joel, indignantly.

"Only that I have a warrant for your apprehension under suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Mr. Trenchard," replies Judbury, coolly. "I've had my eye upon you for a good time; but it's always foolish to hurry these things, and if we'd hurried you we shouldn't have had Podmore's attempt to get away to New York, which brought matters to what I call a focus. Come along, sir, I've got a fly outside. You may just as well come quietly."

And Joel submits, knowing quite enough about English law and English customs to be aware that anything in the way of resistance would be worse than useless. He shrugs his shoulders, and affects to take the matter lightly, though those white lips and haggard eyes of his give the lie to his assumed carelessness.

"If your Redcastle magistrates choose to take me into custody on a fabricated charge, they do it at their own peril," he says, loud enough for those round him to hear. "I shall make them pay as heavily for their pig-headed folly as the law will enable me."

"Step inside, sir," says Mr. Judbury; "you shall have plenty of law, free, gratis, for nothing."

The fly drives off, and Joel makes his entrance for the first time under that mediæval archway whose gates were opened just a week ago to admit Sibyl.

There is a further examination before the magistrates next day. The same witnesses repeat the same evidence. Mr. Levison cross-questions, and is unusually active. Joel Pilgrim sits in the seat of the accused, side by side with Sibyl. He is defended—or rather, the case is watched for him—by a rival of Mr. Levison's, a gentleman equal in renown in the criminal courts. Further details are extorted from Podmore under this cross-firing of interrogation: but Joel Pilgrim's solicitor strives in vain to shake one iota of his testimony. If this be perjury, there never was a more accomplished perjurer, or a false witness that held more firmly to the lesson he had learnt.

When the examination of witnesses is concluded Mr. Levison addresses the magistrates, and urges that his client shall be dismissed without a stain upon her character.

The magistrates confer together, and agree that there is not sufficient evidence to connect Sibyl Secretan with the murder, and that she may therefore be set at liberty.

This being done, Mr. Levison suggests that she shall be placed in the witness-box, and examined as to her possession of the prussic acid.

Pale, and trembling a little, Sibyl takes the necessary oath upon the small black book, and waits to answer the magistrate's questions.

"You have heard your sister's evidence as to your abstraction of the prussic acid from the bottle in your uncle's surgery?"

"Yes."

"Do you admit the truth of that statement?"

"Yes. I was in great distress of mind at the time, and I thought if there were no other way out of my troubles I might destroy myself. I do not say that I meant to do such a wicked thing. I only considered it as a means of release from my difficulties—open to me at the very last extremity."

"And you took the prussic acid with that idea?"

"Yes."

"You had no other design whatever in taking it?"

"None whatever."

"Did Mr. Pilgrim know that you had this poison in you possession?"

"He did."

"How did that happen?"

"Am I obliged to answer this question?" asks Sibyl.

"Yes, it is positively necessary for you to tell us everythin relating to your possession of this prussic acid."

"It had been arranged by my uncle Trenchard that Mr. Pilgrim and I were to be married. My uncle did not know that was married already. He had a prejudice against my husband' family, and I had been so foolish as to keep my marriage secre from him. Mr. Pilgrim went to York to obtain the licence and we were to have been married on the Saturday, the day on which I left Lancaster Lodge. I made up my mind to run away at the last rather than to tell Mr. Trenchard about my marriage It was a cowardly act, I dare say, but I had deceived him so long that I feared his anger on hearing the truth."

"How does this bear upon Mr. Joel Pilgrim's knowing about the prussic acid?"

"I am coming to that. It was on the night of his return from York with the marriage licence. He came up to my little sitting-room late that night, between ten and eleven, and told me about the licence. He had been dining, and he seemed in very high spirits."

"Do you mean that he was intoxicated?"

"Oh no, he was only a little more excited than usual. He talked a good deal about our marriage, and for the first time in his life he tried to kiss me. I showed him the prussic acid bottle, and told him that I would sooner poison myself than let him touch my lips. He was very angry, and he told me that prussic acid was a dangerous thing for a woman to carry about her, and that I was playing with edged tools."

"Did he take the bottle from you?"

"No."

"What became of the bottle after that?"

"I really can't tell. My intention was to put it back into my pocket, but I was very much flurried at this time. I may have left it on the table among the books and other things. There were a great many things on the table."

"When did you miss the bottle?"

"Not till I was in London, when it recurred to my memory. I searched my pocket for it, but it was not to be found."

"Were you wearing the same dress you had on upon the evening when you showed Mr. Pilgrim the bottle?"

"Yes. It is the dress I am wearing now."

This is all. The inquiry is again adjourned.

The inquiry before the coroner is concluded next day, the verdict wilful murder against Joel Pilgrim. The inquiry before the magistrates is concluded the day after by Joel Pilgrim's committal for trial, on the capital charge.

CHAPTER LIV.

"A DARK TALE DARKLY FINISHED."

Sibyl is free once more. She has been in durance scarcely a fortnight, yet it is a new thing for her to come out into the light of day, and feel that she is at liberty to go where she pleases. It is a wondrous and a strange relief to know that the awful suspicion which has been hanging over her, separating her from all the rest of the world, is removed. But her first anxiety is to escape from Redcastle. The place has become hateful to her. She knows that the eyes of those who once flattered and courted her have been turned upon her in cold unpitying curiosity, that of all her summer friends not one has remained true to her in the hour of adversity, and she is eager to get beyond ken of those cold hard faces, beyond the sound of those false voices, which have spoken her fairly in the day of prosperity, and kept silence when she had need of comfort.

"I have no one but you, Alex," she says humbly; "no one but you and dear old uncle Robert. I wonder that you are both so good to me."

She goes straight from the court to Dr. Faunthorpe's house, and is curiously gentle and affectionate in her demeanour to her uncle and the two girls. Marion plunges into vehement hysterics at sight of her elder sister, and on recovering from that attack embraces Sibyl warmly, and is more demonstrative of sisterly affection than she has been for a long time. She is far more kindly disposed towards Sibyl, penniless, and the mark of the world's scorn, than she ever felt towards the supposed heiress to Stephen Trenchard's wealth. As for Jenny, she goes fairly mad, hugs her sister to desperation, is very proud of her own performance in the witness box, and finally rushes out to the kitchen to ask Hester to make hot cakes for tea. No one who has not eaten Yorkshire cakes, and seen them made and baked in a Yorkshire kitchen, by a brisk and energetic Yorkshire housewife, can have a just idea of the celerity with which this operation can be performed.

But on this particular evening Sibyl is far too languid to be tempted into injuring her digestion by the consumption of hot buttered cakes. She sits in a corner of the old parlour sofa and takes her cup of tea in pensive silence, and the anxious little doctor sees that the events of the last few months have had a destroying influence upon his favourite niece's health and beauty. He creeps close beside her and feels her pulse. It is quick and irregular.

"You want rest, my love," he says, "you must stay with us for a few weeks in your old room, and let me doctor you, and Hester nurse you, till you get strong again."

"I like my old room, uncle Robert, and I love to be with you but I hate Redcastle. I should never get well here. Let me g with my husband to his new home, if he will have me."

She looks pleadingly at Alexis, and sees that she has been forgiven.

"My home is yours, Sibyl, and I will take you there as soon as you are free to go. But I think you had better accept you uncle's hospitality for a little while, as your evidence will be required for Mr. Pilgrim's trial."

"What?" asks Sibyl, "is it not all over?"

"No, my love, the trial has to come yet, and the witnesses examined by the coroner and magistrate will have to repeat thei evidence?"

"How dreadful!" sighs Sibyl.

"It is an ordeal to be gone through, my love, but when that is over we shall be free to go to Cheswold Grange, and all our troubles will be over, I hope. And before the summer is ended your uncle and your sisters must come and pay us a visit in Hampshire."

"That will be delightful!" cries Jenny, rapturously; "Have you a nice garden?"

"A glorious old garden, Jenny, with about a mile of wall fruit. Such plums and peaches!"

"A nursery for English cholera," says the doctor.

"And there's a pony, Jane,—you'd like that, I think," observes Alexis.

"Shouldn't I just!"

"But before you come to Cheswold Grange I should like you to cure yourself of one bad habit, Jane. I won't mention it before company, but if you recall to mind a certain interview between a gentleman and a young lady I dare say you will understand what I mean.'

Jenny blushes vehemently, remembering that little romance about Mrs. Yokohama Gray.

So all is forgiveness and peace in the shabby old house at the end of the town, and Alexis, touched to the heart by his wife's contrition, and by those sad eyes of hers which have a weary look that tells of suffering borne and hidden, feels that his old love for her is not quite dead, and that after all, faulty though she has been, she is the woman he would choose to sit by his fireside in the old house at Cheswold.

Alexis returns to his hotel that evening, where there is much talk of Joel Pilgrim and his arrest. No one has any doubt of his guilt, and many go so far as to affirm that they have been convinced of it from the first, and have declared their convictions to their friends and acquaintance. These being called upon to bear witness to this fact answer meanly that they don't exactly remember: that such opinions may have been expressed: but that they fail to recall them. In any case Joel is prejudged in Redcastle, and there is a wonderful reaction about Sibyl, who is exalted into a heroine and martyr, as if to have been wrongfully suspected was equivalent to having performed some great and noble action. Mrs. Stormont calls for the first time in her life at the shabby old house at the lower end of the town, and leaves quite a packet of cards for Dr. Faunthorpe and his nieces, and one of the Colonel's cards for the special benefit of Mr. Secretan; for it has become known to Redcastle that Alexis has a pretty little estate in Hampshire, and is by no means that fortuneless adventurer he was supposed to be on his first appearance upon the Redcastle stage.

Everybody is eager for the trial, and there is a great deal of speculation as to the exact date at which it will "come on," and who will be the Crown lawyer, and who will defend the accused. Before midnight there runs a rumour that Pilgrim has secured the famous Vallentyne for his defender, and there is an idea that he will get off.

"A clever counsel could shake the butler's evidence, make the jury disbelieve him altogether; and without his evidence how are they to bring the crime home to Pilgrim?" ask the knowing ones.

Before noon next day it is known that Joel Pilgrim has accepted his earthly defeat, and has gone forth to meet the fiat of a more terrible Judge than that sage and learned lawyer who would have sat in judgment upon him at the forthcoming assizes. Early on the morning following his arrest he has found means to elude the vigilance of his warder, and has opened a vein with a small penknife, which he has contrived to keep hidden in the silken lining of his coat-sleeve. Lying quietly on his prison bed, the warder slumbering on a pallet by his side, he has given himself his death-wound, and let life ebb silently without a groan.

He has occupied the earlier part of the night in writing, and this is the result, which is speedily devoured by the ravening maws of a thousand different newspapers and given to the world. It figures on the hoardings before newsvendors' shops in fat black capitals:—

"Startling Revelation—The Redcastle Murder—Dying Confession of Joel Pilgrim!"

"If it is any satisfaction to the world at large, which never gave me anything that I did not obtain by an appeal to its self-interest, to know the history of a man whose hours are now numbered, I give it in a few words.

"I am the son of Stephen Trenchard, the only offspring of his marriage with a Hindoo dancing girl, and that marriage about as legal an union as a European of some social standing cares to contract with a low caste Indian. My mother had, I believe, little except her beauty to recommend her to an Englishman's notice; but she was inoffensive, and she died young,—tw merits which secured her husband's respect.

"My father never acknowledged this marriage, or me as his sor But he took me into his office at an early age, and finding that was tolerably shrewd, and of his own way of thinking in commercial matters, had me well educated between the age of eightee and twenty-four, and at twenty-five took me for his partner.

"The fortunes of our house varied as years went on. W made money very fast, but we had the misfortune sometimes t lose it even faster. Our gains generally tempted us to mak losses, and each successful transaction brought an unluck follower at its heels. Thus if we made a hundred per cent. b indigo one year, we perhaps lost a hundred and fifty per cent. b indigo the next, being lured into some reckless speculation, tim bargains, and the rest of it. Our opium trade brought us mos money, and we trafficked in other goods which proved profitabl merchandise, but somewhat damaged the character of our hous In other words, rather than let our vessels ground upon thei beef-bones for want of a remunerative cargo, we occasionall went in quietly for the slave trade, supplied our Demerara friend with Coolies, and shipped a good deal of live stock of this kin at different ports. To put it briefly we were general dealers or a large scale.

"The business had never been weaker than in that year whe my father suddenly took it into his head that it was time for hin to retire, and drew ten thousand pounds out of the house, som thousands beyond our real capital. It left me with a crippled business, and I felt that my father had done me a great wrong by this selfish retirement. For the first year after his return t England fortune favoured me, and the prospects of the hous brightened. I made one or two lucky hits, and began to pluck up spirit. But this state of things did not last long. I lost shipload of coolies under somewhat painful circumstances. Th ship and supposed cargo, not the coolies, were heavily insured The underwriters refused to pay, and there was some talk o scuttling. This scandal, although strangled in the birth, did m harm. A commercial man's reputation is as delicate a blossom as a hothouse flower, any chill wind nips it. When I found things going to the bad in Calcutta, I came home, thinking tha my father might help me out of my difficulties, or at leas enable me to float my unwieldy ship a little while longer by the use of a few of those thousands he had squeezed out of the business. This he peremptorily refused, and had the injustice t accuse me of bad trading. We had bitter words on the subjec on many occasions; and not content with refusing to help me he urged me to raise money to pay off the remaining ter thousand pounds due to him by a deed of dissolution which he had made me sign before he left Calcutta, he resigning his share of the business in consideration of receiving twenty thousand pounds, ten thousand at the time of the execution of the deed, ten thousand within three years from that date.

"The time had expired, and he urged me repeatedly to raise the money. When he found that I had set my heart upon marrying his niece—whom I naturally supposed to be a single woman—he made my payment of this ten thousand pounds a condition of my marriage. No money, no wife, he said—thus using my tenderest feelings as a lever to wrench money out of me. I think this plan of proceeding hardly comes under the head of fatherly affection.

"Of the tragedy which terminated the story of my father's existence I have nothing to say. Time may perhaps make that mystery clear. I shall not gratify idle curiosity by any revelation, supposing it to be in my power to reveal anything touching this question, which I leave as a subject for speculation to that new school which devotes its labours to the studies of psychological mysteries."

This is all—disappointing perhaps to the world in general, but giving Redcastle a new subject for conversation.

"Imagine that horrid Indian being Mr. Trenchard's son after all!" exclaims Mrs. Stormont, when she and her dear Mrs. Groshen meet to discuss the latest scandal over their harlequin teacups. "I always thought there was a likeness."

"I can't say that I saw any resemblance. Such a difference in complexion, you know. But what a horribly disreputable set these Trenchards seem to have been!" says Mrs. Groshen, in a wholesale way, as if there had been a regiment of them.

"Yes, selling slaves, and opium, and scuttling ships, and doing everything horrid."

"And to think that we should have asked them to dinner!" cries the banker's wife, remembering how often she has squandered her housekeeping money upon hothouse fruit and flowers to decorate the board at which Stephen Trenchard was to be the chief guest.

"How lucky that dreadful Pilgrim never accepted our invitations!" exclaims Mrs. Stormont. "I have no doubt he was afraid to show himself in society. He eats with chopsticks, I dare say."

"I rather think that chopsticks are Chinese, my dear," replies Mrs. Groshen, whose remembrance of the Child's Guide to Useful Knowledge has not been weakened by the lapse of so many years as have gone by since her elder friend left a fashionable boarding school, carefully finished in all those elegant accomplishments which take six years to learn and can be comfortably forgotten in three.

Thus runs town talk in quiet Redcastle. There will be no trial, and among the general public interest in Stephen Trenchard's murder languishes, and soon dies for want of nutriment.

EPILOGUE.

All through the rest of the summer weather, till the leaves change from green to red and yellow, and the sturdy oaks, slow to bud and last to succumb to Time the destroyer, have put on their russet livery, Sibyl lies in the chief bedchamber at Cheswold Grange sick nigh unto death. She has broken down utterly now that the struggle is over, now that all storms are ended and her frail bark safe in harbour. There is no violent illness, no raging fever of brain or body, only an extreme prostration, which for a long time baffles the skill of an intelligent physician and a careful family doctor.

She lies in the bright pretty bedroom, with its old panelled walls painted pale pink and cream colour, its needlework pictures, its quaint furniture, and many relics of a departed generation. There is a wide window opposite her bed that extends from ceiling to floor, and through this she listlessly contemplates the fair landscape, the smiling garden, the autumnal glory of the park. She suffers little pain, except such weariness as attends extreme prostration. She is at peace, and even declares herself happy.

"I have lived long enough, Alex," she says one day when her strength has ebbed to the lowest point compatible with life, and the doctors have begun to despair of the efficiency of the pharmacopeia in this particular case. Alexis, deeply moved, sits by her bed, and holds her feeble hand in the dim autumn twilight. "I am content for my earthly race to finish here. You have forgiven me. That is enough."

"But have you no thought of me, Sibyl? Is it kind to talk like that?"

"Dear Alex, you have been more than good to me, but I have not forgotten what you said that evening of our meeting in the old room at Mrs. Bonny's. 'Love is dead,' you told me."

"That was said under the influence of anger, Sibyl. I thought it was true, but sorrow soon fastened the old knot again. Sorrow and peril reunited us, Sibyl."

"And do you really love me? I know that you have forgiven me, but are you sure you love me still?"

"Very sure,—as much and as truly as I ever loved you in old Kensington Gardens, under the elms, when I told the Hazleton children fairy tales, and my life and yours seemed as sweet a fairy tale as any of those old nursery stories, and as sure of a blissful ending."

"Oh, Alex, is that the truth?"

"As I live, darling."

"Then I think I shall make an effort and get well," replies Sibyl, with a sigh of utter contentment. "I have been willing to glide gently out of life, believing that, however good you were to me, I could never hope to win more than your forgiveness; but now I shall try very hard to get well."

She keeps her word. Whether her illness has reached its natural turning-point—the tide of life flowing back to its source, —or whether the ardent desire of the patient to live helps the work of recovery, the medical men cannot say. But from this time there is a change. Slowly but surely health and youth come back to the pale wan face. The lovely eyes lose their glassy lustre, and grow bright with happy thoughts; faint gleams of carnation flit like the shadow of a sunset cloud over the marble pallor, then linger, and warm the pallid cheek into life and beauty.

"Your love has won me back from the grave, Alex," whispers Sibyl, four or five weeks after that talk in the twilight, when the family doctor—that very Mr. Skalpel who attended Alexis after his accident—has declared that Mrs. Secretan's recovery is absolutely marvellous.

When Sibyl is out of danger, Richard Plowden, who has been a faithful friend and comforter throughout this time of trouble, and has acted as Trot's chief nurse and playmate into the bargain, departs somewhat abruptly upon a journey, the business and destination whereof he does not reveal to his dear friend Alexis.

"It's a little bit of a trip I've been meditating for a longish time," he says; "I'll tell you all about it when I come back. I think I shall start to-morrow."

"You'll write to us while you're away, of course, Dick?"

"Well, yes, if I can manage it," replies Mr. Plowden, with rather a sheepish air; "but you mustn't be alarmed if you don't hear from me. I shall be moving about from place to place, you see, and I may be out of the way of post-offices—off the beaten track, you know."

"Good gracious!" exclaims Alexis, "are you going to the centre of Africa? Is my modest geographer coming out as a second Sir Samuel Baker?"

Alexis is too much occupied with his wife's recovery just now to be very curious about his friend. He thinks Dick's movements are somewhat eccentric, and that is all.

"Perhaps he objects to my being here," says Sibyl, who has learned to think very humbly of herself of late.

"Object to you, Sibyl! Why you must know that he is absolutely devoted to you, and has been almost as anxious as I was during your illness. He was prejudiced against you before he saw you, out of affection for me, poor fellow, thinking that I had been hardly used; but when once you came back to love and duty he was your slave."

For about a month nothing is heard of Richard Plowden, and Alexis is beginning to feel somewhat uneasy about his friend's fate, when he receives a letter, in Dick's neat hand, posted at Cannes.

"My dear friend," writes Richard, "when I left you and Mrs.

Secretan so abruptly I was departing upon so daring and wild an expedition, that I felt too much ashamed of my own audacity to tell you my errand. I came to the south of France to discover whether there was any hope of my ever winning, by long years of patient devotion, the dearest and best, purest and most unselfish of women. You had told me to hope in the day of my despondency, and I had hoped, although I scorned myself for my foolishness in hoping. At last I told myself that it was worse than foolish to go on hoping and dreaming. I must 'put it to the touch, and win or lose it all,' as Montrose says. So I came here, found my sweetest Linda working industriously at her art, pensive, but not altogether unhappy. She was delighted to see me—not for my own sake, you may be sure, but because I could tell her all about Trot. How I have blessed that dear child! She was never tired of hearing me talk of him. I spent all my evenings at her aunt's house—such a dear old lady, the aunt—talking about Trot, and a little about art and science, and literature, and my own small views and ambitions. What happy evenings they were!

"Well, Alex, I am too proud of her—too ashamed of my own unworthiness, to tell you much more. I can only say that God has been very good to me—that I am more blessed than ever I hoped to be—that if I had been born in the dear old fairy times which I have told Trot so much about that I have grown almost to believe in them myself—if I had been the special favourite of some omnipotent good fairy, and had had a talking bird, and Fortunatus's purse, and an invisible cap, and a flying carpet, and the princess with the golden locks for my bride, I could not have been one whit happier than I am, or more astonished at my own happiness.

"I am in such a state of surprise that I am doubtful of my own identity, and hardly feel sure that I have any right to sign myself—your faithful friend, DICK PLOWDEN."

Very happy are Alexis and his wife one sunny morning early in December, when Sibyl, leaning on her husband's arm, and with Trot at her side, makes her first round of the Cheswold domain.

The hoar-frost whitens the lawn and meadows; yet there are late roses still blooming on the wall. Alexis insists upon his wife seeing everything—hothouses, stables, piggeries even—and Sibyl inspects and admires rapturously enough to content an exacting lord of the manor.

"It is all lovely!" she exclaims; "and what is best of all, the place suits you, Alex, and you suit the place to perfection. You seem to have been made for a country squire. How strange it is to know that Providence held *this* in store for you in that bitter time at Mrs. Bonny's! While I was waiting for a dead man's shoes, you, who never cringed to any man, or courted any inheritance, have been blest by Fortune."

THE END.

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